

Reviewing Margaret Atwood

Gendered Criticism in American Book Reviews

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
What is gendered criticism?	2
Some theoretical starting points	4
 Chapter 1. The Brontës in Nineteenth-Century America	 6
1.1. “Its deep philosophy comes from the heart of a woman, not the brain of a man”	7
1.2. “The clear distinct, decisive style [...] continually suggests a male mind”	11
1.3. “She would make a glorious lover, but a very uncomfortable wife”	16
 Chapter 2. Margaret Atwood in the 1970s	 19
2.1. Historical context	20
2.2. “Margaret Atwood is, of course, a woman writer”	22
2.3. “She is Hemingway in darkest Africa; she is not a Smith young lady”	28
2.4. “Her writing has always been objective and distant”	30
2.5. “Definitely a ‘woman’s book’”	33
2.6. What has changed since the nineteenth century?	35
2.7. Men’s gendered criticism?	36
 Chapter 3. <i>Oryx and Crake</i>	 38
3.1. “The ‘star text’ that is Margaret Atwood”	39
3.2. “Literature with a capital ‘L’”	45
3.3. “What we look for from Atwood is intricate characterization”	49
3.4. “There is no single, simple, static ‘women’s point of view’”	52
3.5. What has changed since the 1970s?	55
3.6. Men’s (un)gendered criticism?	57
 Chapter 4. <i>Moral Disorder</i>	 59
4.1. “A kindly, wise old granny”	60
4.2. “Life with a capital L”	64
4.3. “The reader could easily divine that the narrator is Atwood herself”	70
4.4. The death of the author?	72

4.5. Are book reviews changing?	73
Conclusion	76
Bibliography	81

Introduction

In 1972 Margaret Atwood told the *Winnipeg Free Press* that what women concerned with liberation really should examine was “the critical vocabulary available for talking about books. It is a male-oriented critical language” (Bolton 12). In this thesis I aim to do exactly that. I will look at the critical reception of five of Atwood’s works, beginning with her three earliest novels and finishing with the contemporary *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *Moral Disorder* (2006). My focus will be on book reviews in some of the most influential American newspapers and magazines. What was the critical vocabulary like during the turbulent 1970s, and what is it like today? Does gender play a part as a critical category in the serious press?

My thesis will draw on the debate about the American canon. Building on Jane Tompkins’s arguments I will discuss why some works enter the canon and why others are left out. The American canon is dominated by men, with a few exceptions, such as Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson. Two of the questions I want to raise are: Which criteria seem to dominate when books by women are reviewed? Could these criteria make it more difficult for women’s texts to become part of the canon than for men’s texts?

The first chapter of my thesis will set the stage, so to speak, by looking at the American reception of the novels of the Brontë sisters during the nineteenth century. Which stereotypes did they encounter because of their gender? The Brontë sisters are especially interesting in this respect because they wrote under male pseudonyms, and once their identities were known, the reviews changed considerably. Although the Brontës are British they are relevant as an earlier historical example in my thesis because British literature was widely read in the United States during the 1800s. This literature was what Americans read before their own literary canon was established.

In the second chapter I will discuss the reception of Margaret Atwood’s first three novels, *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), and *Lady Oracle* (1976). These novels were published in the midst of the women’s movement in the United States, and I will argue that the criticism shows both some of the changes in American society since the nineteenth century, and how all critics inevitably are situated in their own time. This discussion will be continued in the two last chapters, when I move on to the contemporary *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *Moral Disorder* (2006). Furthermore, my thesis will hopefully be a contribution to the study of Margaret Atwood’s authorship, and I will discuss how her fame has affected the reception of her later books. An important aspect I will consider is how an author’s name

affects the reception of her books. Finally, my thesis will briefly consider certain aspects of the American press, such as the status of book reviews in today's digital society.

In addition to my personal admiration for Margaret Atwood and her works, I have chosen to discuss her books and their reception because Atwood is what I would consider a mainstream writer. She does not primarily see herself as a feminist author, and her novels have not been particularly controversial. She is also widely acclaimed and received, which makes my task easier since many reviews are accessible. I will look at her first three novels and two of her latest books because in this way I hope to see possible changes in the area of criticism, and perhaps also be able to reflect on the impact of the feminist movement. Also, this will give insights into the changes in Atwood's authorship and reception.

Although Atwood is a Canadian, I will focus on her reception in the United States. A thorough analysis of both American and Canadian newspapers would go beyond the scope of my thesis, as this would require me to consider not only many more publications but also the differences between American and Canadian society, the two literary histories of the countries, the different impact feminism has had on the two countries, and also the way in which Atwood's nationality has had an impact on the reception of her books in Canada. I will touch upon this in my thesis, but the focus of my analysis will be limited to American newspapers.

What is gendered criticism?

When I use the term "gendered criticism" I refer to criticism which is influenced by the gender of the author. A common example of gendered criticism has been pointed out by Margaret Atwood herself:

I am always confused with [my characters]. [...] Some of them are people I couldn't possibly be, but I get confused with them anyway. [...] The other thing about that is that people are more willing to accept the fact that a man is capable of invention, than they are to accept the fact that a woman is capable of invention. Women are still considered to be more subjective; so you get the view that all women can really do is tell the story of their feelings, their own feelings, not their characters. (Martens 127)

As I will show, gendered criticism can take many forms. Some of the most obvious ones are the stereotypes we will encounter in the Brontë reviews, such as the view of women and their writing as trivial, formless, or confined. Furthermore, gendered criticism can reinforce the binary oppositions discussed by feminists like Hélène Cixous, who argue that language

consists of dichotomies like passive/active, instinct/logic, emotion/reason, and nature/culture, where the former is seen as both the female and the negative parts of the dichotomies (see for instance Cixous “Sorties”). Other examples of gendered criticism include discussing the author’s personal life instead of her novel, and labeling women who write “women writers” as opposed to “writers,” who implicitly are male. I will discuss these examples in more detail when they are relevant to my analysis of the reviews. There are also less obvious examples of gendered criticism. This will most clearly be seen in my two last chapters, where I will argue that the view of literature as timeless and as embodying universal truths can be especially troublesome for female writers.

It is important to consider whether all gendered criticism in fact is negative. Some feminists argue that there indeed is a difference between how men and women write. Hélène Cixous and other French feminists discuss “écriture féminine,” or feminine language (see for instance Cixous “Castration or Decapitation”). Mary Jacobus defines this as “a language freed from the Freudian notion of castration, by which female difference is defined as lack rather than otherness” (12). This language is for example, according to Cixous and others, filled with puns, and has a special rhythm. I will discuss the differences between men’s and women’s writing in more detail later, especially in Chapter Two. And throughout my thesis it will be important to consider whether Atwood in some ways is calling for a gendered reading of her books, and also to be aware that focus on gender is not automatically something negative. The differences between the books, in terms of content, genre, and form are also crucial to consider in this respect. For example, *Oryx and Crake* differs substantially from the other books in that it is not concerned with what can be called feminist issues, and its protagonist is a man. Therefore, it is natural to expect less discussion of gender in the reviews of this novel than of the others.

Another aspect I will consider throughout the thesis is whether the male reviewers focus more on gender than the female reviewers. Joanna Russ argued in 1972 that “both men and women in our culture conceive the culture from a single point of view – the male” (4). By looking at the reviews and the gender of the critic, I will be able to reflect on whether this holds true today.

In this thesis I will use the terms reviewer and critic interchangeably. An argument can be made for distinguishing between a literary critic educated in academia and a reviewer who is a journalist writing for a newspaper. This would however be a futile distinction in my thesis, as I do not know the background of all the reviewers, and some of them are even

anonymous. I will however comment on the critic's background when I find it relevant, as well as the differences between the various publications and the forms of criticism they use.

Some theoretical starting points

My thesis places itself within the field of reception studies. As explained by Jeremy Hawthorn, in reception studies the focus is on "the ways in which art works are received, individually and collectively, by their 'consumers'" (170). Furthermore, reception theory indicates "a view of literary texts as partially open, and of the responses engendered by them to be (again partly) the creation of their readers" (Hawthorn 171). This means that in reception studies a text is not regarded as an ahistorical entity, rather, the situatedness of the reader is important for how a work is read. In *Truth and Method* from 1979, Hans-Georg Gadamer discusses how when reading, the reader's "horizon of understanding" confronts the "horizon of understanding" of the text (Storey 43). John Storey sums up Gadamer's argument in that

texts and readers always encounter each other in historical and social locations and [...] the situatedness of this encounter always informs the interaction between reader and text. In this way, he [Gadamer] contends, a text is always read with preconceptions and prejudices. (Storey 42)

These preconceptions and prejudices become a vital part of the text. In the context of my thesis it will be particularly important to consider how the readers' preconceptions of women and women's literature become part of their readings, and this is something I will discuss in all chapters. In this way my thesis relates to what is often called "Images of Women" criticism, i.e. "the search for female stereotypes in the work of male writers and in the critical categories employed by male reviewers commenting on women's work" (Moi *Sexual/Textual Politics* 31).

Another important assumption for my thesis is that the author is relevant for how we read a text. The author has always been a subject of debate in literary criticism, and after Roland Barthes declared the death of the author in 1967 (125-130), this debate has not lessened. I will throughout my thesis refer to aspects of this controversy, and it becomes especially relevant in my last chapter. Important questions are how the reader is influenced by the name of the author, and also whether the author should be taken into account when reading a text.

Since I will argue for the need for self-reflexivity in criticism, and that critics should be aware of their own preconceptions and prejudices, I should also point out that I of course also have my own preconceptions on the subject I write about. This concerns both my great admiration for Margaret Atwood as well as my interest in feminist criticism. My greatest influence in this respect is probably Toril Moi, who has discussed many of the most pressing questions of my thesis in a clear and thought-provoking way. These influences will inevitably color my thesis, but as will become clear, no criticism can be objective. With this in mind, I move on to some examples of American criticism of the nineteenth century.

Chapter 1: The Brontës in Nineteenth-Century America

Most of the literature which was published in the United States during the nineteenth century was imported from Britain. The American Copyright Act of 1790, which granted authors rights over their works during the first fourteen years after publication, only applied to native authors and residents in the United States (Amory and Hall 478). This meant that imports could be reprinted freely, and as Mary Kelley explains, it was therefore often too risky and expensive to publish American authors:

Lacking its own commercially viable publishing, the young republic revealed its cultural dependence upon England as American booksellers welcomed reprints of British fiction. [...] The market on this side of the Atlantic was flooded with imports. [...] There was little incentive for a publisher to share the profits with an author, to pay for the copyright of a work, or, for that matter, to undertake the gamble of an expensive and cumbersome process of manufacturing when cheap imported reprints were available. [...] Publishers engaged in a frantic struggle with one another to reach the marketplace first with competing reprints of the same work. (Kelley 7-8)

This means that there is a difference between the American literary canon created by posterity, and what most people actually read during the nineteenth century. A common culture existed between Britain and America, and British reprints were read across the ocean in even greater numbers than books by American authors. The Brontë sisters' works were among these reprints, and are thereby part of not just British but also American literary history. British authors certainly influenced the American-born authors. An amusing anecdote in this respect concerns a letter from Harriet Beecher Stowe to George Eliot, where Stowe claims that she has had a spiritual conversation with Charlotte Brontë (Haight 403). More importantly, the American reviews I will discuss illustrate the American literary climate at the time, and will be useful as a basis for comparison with American reviews of a much more recent period.

The Brontë sisters wrote under pseudonyms when their books were first published. Charlotte Brontë called herself Currer Bell, Emily Brontë's pseudonym was Ellis Bell, while their sister Anne's pseudonym was Acton Bell. "We did not like to declare ourselves women, because [...] we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice," Charlotte Brontë wrote in 1850 (Ewbank 1). Many of the earliest critics of the Brontë novels assumed that the authors were men. In 1850 Charlotte Brontë revealed the authors' true identities in the introduction to a new edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes*

Grey (Ewbank 1). Her sisters were now dead. The pseudonyms make the reception of their works especially illuminating, as the criticism shifted considerably when the sisters' identities were known.

I will now discuss the gendered criticism in American publications at the time. Although I have looked at and will briefly refer to several reviews, I will especially discuss three reviews written about Brontë novels. I have chosen to primarily focus on only three reviews because reviews were much longer during the nineteenth century than they are today, and with much more obviously gendered criticism. Since this chapter mainly will be a basis for comparison with the next chapters, I have found sufficient material in these reviews to illustrate the main points. Furthermore, these reviews seem representative of the criticism during the period, and they are taken from some of the most important publications in the United States at the time.¹

The reviews I will focus on are from the *North American Review* ("Novels of the Season," Boston, October 1848), the *American Whig Review* ("*Shirley*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Wuthering Heights*," New York, March 1850), and the *Atlantic Monthly* ("The Haworth Brontë," Boston, January 1901). The *North American Review* was the first literary magazine in the United States, and also one of the most influential (Stovall 4-5). The *American Whig Review* was also one of the country's first literary periodicals (Stovall 5), and it was a respected periodical with Edgar Allan Poe amongst its contributors (Hart 29). The *Atlantic Monthly* was a large magazine with contributors like Emerson and Longfellow, and it still exists today (Hart 43).²

"Its deep philosophy comes from the heart of a woman, not the brain of a man"

A common way of looking at nineteenth-century literature has been to see men and women's writing as two separate categories. The above quotation from the *American Whig Review* (231) indeed illustrates important differences which were thought to exist between the sexes. I will begin by discussing the concept of "separate spheres," which, although too simplistic, has been important for our understanding of nineteenth-century American society and criticism. The separate spheres theory claims that during the time of the Brontës, in people's lives as

¹ The publications are also chosen for practical reasons, as they are easily accessible on the Internet today. The reviews I refer to can be found in the *Making of America* archives on the Internet (see the Bibliography for further information).

² In the rest of the chapter I will refer to these reviews by the publication names only. If nothing else is indicated, the titles and dates of the articles will be the ones mentioned above.

well as their minds, society was divided between the domestic sphere of women and the public sphere of men. While men were expected to deal with politics and communal issues, women were supposed to be good mothers and take care of the home. The virtuous, innocent woman represented the “cult of true womanhood” during this time. Elaine Showalter explains that

The middle-class ideology of the proper sphere of womanhood, which developed in post-industrial England and America, prescribed a woman who would be a Perfect Lady, an Angel in the House, contentedly submissive to men, but strong in her own realm of the Home. (14)

The differences between men and women were thought to be grounded in biology, so that women were in their nature more emotional and less rational than men, hence writing from the heart rather than the brain. Furthermore, women were expected to write in a more “feminine” manner, both in style and content. When the critic in the *American Whig Review* thinks that Caroline in *Shirley* is “a character the masculine readers of this book will delight to dwell upon. Submissive, sympathizing, truthful, seeking support for her gentle nature, she has for Gerard all that boundless devotion” (231), he emphasises the traits which were seen to be among the most important in women, such as gentleness and innocence. Later, the critic describes Caroline as “the assemblage [...] of all that is perfect in woman” (232).

In a modern framework these perceived differences between the sexes are discussed by feminists like Hélène Cixous as dichotomies. “Thought has always worked by [...] dual, *hierarchized* oppositions,” Cixous convincingly argues (“Sorties” 264). One of these oppositions is seen as superior while the other is inferior, and the negative parts of the dichotomies are the ones attached to women (“Sorties” 264). Some of the most central dichotomies are intuition (female) versus reason (male) and emotion (female) versus intellect (male). In the reviews it is not obvious at first glance that the female parts of the dichotomies are the negative ones. That Charlotte Brontë is writing from “the heart of a woman” rather than “the brain of a man” is not obviously negative, and in the *North American Review* the critic explains that “there are niceties of thought and emotion in a woman’s mind which no man can delineate, but which often escapes unawares from a female writer” (356). Here women’s intuition seems to lead to good writing. But the critic also implies that women who write well do so because of intuition, not skill: It “escapes unawares.” This kind of criticism reduces the value and authority of the female writer: She is not skilful when she writes well; it

is rather a stroke of luck which the author does not control. And if you cannot control your good writing, then there is less reason to admire it.

A similar devaluation can be found in the *Atlantic Monthly*, written fifty years later. Here the critic believes that

By some happy prescience their art availed itself of methods that have grown more and more effective in the fifty years that have elapsed since these books were written. Their use of landscape, to select an obvious example, has naïvely anticipated many of the consciously impressionistic or symbolistic experiments of later writers. By natural sensitiveness to the influences of sky and moor [...] these amateurs in fiction still move the mind to wondering delight or vague foreboding. (135)

The critic claims that the Brontës were ahead of their time, and anticipated the more experimental writing of later periods. This is not seen as a conscious innovative step, however, but rather as a “happy prescience” which “naïvely anticipated” later “more effective” writing. Again, good writing by women is not seen as a conscious act. Later writers have used the same techniques, but now the effort is conscious and due to logic and reason on the part of the writer. The critic admires the writing, but clearly does not believe that the writing was an intellectual process but rather a result of intuition and “natural sensitiveness” from these “amateurs in fiction.” Nature versus culture is another dichotomy which is closely related to this. In the *Atlantic Monthly* the Brontës and their writings are also seen as part of the “world of nature” (135) and their natural sensitivity makes their use of landscape impressive. Nature connects to instinct, while culture relates to intellect and civilization.

It is important to realize that during the nineteenth century these dichotomies were not simply stereotypes but also functioned normatively. After the Brontë sisters’ identities were revealed, a crucial issue was whether the Brontës were feminine enough, and wrote like women were supposed to do. In the *American Whig Review* the critic concludes that “less pleasing is the picture we have of the authoress of *Wuthering Heights*. [...] If she is fair, her beauty is of Pandemonium. She would make a glorious lover, but a very uncomfortable wife” (234). The Brontë novels, and especially *Wuthering Heights*, were repeatedly criticised for being unfeminine, and as a consequence the authors themselves were not seen as living up to what has been called the cult of true womanhood. The same critic believes that in Charlotte Brontë “we look in vain for the gentleness of woman [...] that raises man to the throne of the god, and fills the heart of woman with devotion and deep truth” (233). Brontë scholar Katherine Frank explains that “a double critical standard clearly operated in the reactions to the novels. Power exercised by a male writer was one thing – usually permissible and even

admired; in the hands of a woman, however, it could easily trespass the boundaries of good taste and become ‘coarse’, or [...] ‘vulgar’” (237). Many female authors feared this kind of criticism. Writing could in itself be seen as an unwomanly act, and as Elaine Showalter explains, the writers “responded to these innuendos of inferiority, as to others, not by protest but by vigorous demonstration of domestic felicity. They worked hard to present their writing as an extension of their feminine role” (85). Also, female writers reacted by “playing down the effort behind their writing, and trying to make their work appear as the spontaneous overflow of their womanly emotions” (Showalter 83). The stereotypical dichotomies were therefore not simply something men projected onto women and their literature but an integral part of nineteenth-century society.

Furthermore, these expectations of women and women’s literature influenced not only the reception of the works but often also how women wrote. As Karen Sanchez-Eppler argues, “traditional notions of female purity attach both to the body [...] and to language” (42). Quite a few women used these stereotypes to their advantage, fulfilling them while at the same time subverting them. We see this for instance in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, where “the mad wife locked in the attic symbolizes the passionate and sexual side of Jane’s personality” (Showalter 28). Another famous example is Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).³ While emphasising that she is aware of how a real woman is supposed to be (virtuous, innocent), Jacobs at the same time shows how these standards are unattainable for slave women. “O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or costum. [...] I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others” (47-48), she writes. And “I shed bitter tears that I was no longer worthy of being respected by the good and pure. [...] There was no prospect of being able to lead a better life” (63-64). In this way she makes white women identify with her and thereby encourages them to fight against slavery. Also, rather than stating it bluntly, Jacobs merely implies the sexual harassment she was a victim of, so that her writing does not appear too crude or unfeminine. In a similar manner, feminists like Jane Tompkins have shown how domestic literature, which earlier was seen as trivial, had clear political ambitions which went far beyond the drawing room.⁴

³ The brief discussion of *Incidents* builds on the paper “Empathy and Implication in Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*” which I wrote for ENGL586: “Visibility and African American Women” at The University of Alberta and The University of Oslo fall 2007 / spring 2008.

⁴ See for instance Tompkins, Jane. *Sensational Designs*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

“The clear distinct, decisive style [...] continually suggests a male mind”

The value of identifying this “separate spheres” logic is also debatable, however. Cathy N. Davidson argues that “the metaphor allows the literary historian both to model the last century’s binaric view of gender and to practice it. [...] Binaric thinking inspires a way of conceptualizing the nineteenth century that is itself binaric” (444). While we see from the criticism I have discussed that the binary oppositions indeed were influential for people’s thoughts and expectations, this does not mean that all women wrote domestic literature. Furthermore, recent scholarship has shown that sentimental literature was not just a part of women’s domestic sphere but was also written and read by men.⁵ The Brontë sisters themselves clearly did not write conventional, sentimental fiction, and the uncertainty and intense speculation about the authors’ identities in the first reviews indicate that their books were not easily pinned down as “feminine” or “masculine.” Another difficulty with the “separate spheres” metaphor is that it indicates that gender is the only important category, and that all women during the nineteenth century had approximately the same lives and experiences. Clearly, the “cult of true womanhood” and the “domestic sphere” were primarily relevant for the middle or upper classes. Working women or slaves did for instance not easily fall into these categories, and we must be aware of the differences and complexities in these relations. A last aspect to consider is how the literary standards were different during the nineteenth century than they are now, not just for women but also for men. Before the advent of modernism in the early twentieth century, literature was thought to have a social function, and the morality of the story was important for the success of a work. Toril Moi calls this “idealism” and points out that modernism had important positive effects for women, in that they could be depicted in other ways than just as elevated and pure (*Henrik Ibsen* 103). At the same time modernism’s view of literature clearly has its own problems, which I will discuss in the next chapters. For now it is important to note that the coarseness and immorality the Brontë sisters were accused of (as witnessed in a long article in the *Ladies’ Repository* from 1876 called “Moral Influence of Charlotte Brontë’s writings”) were not simply due to their gender and them being “unwomanly,” but also stemmed from a belief in the social functions of literature. While such “immoral” writing was still more shocking in a woman than a man, this is at the same time more complicated than previously noted.

⁵ See for instance Chapman, Mary and Glen Hendler. *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

Even though the separate spheres theory clearly is too simplistic and generalizing, I consider it fruitful to use the dichotomies as a framework here, since they will also be relevant for the rest of my thesis. This also goes for certain stereotypes of women's writing which I find in the reviews, and which I will go on to discuss now.

The Brontë sisters' gender meant that certain attributes were given to their fiction as a result of stereotypes connected to women's writing. In her influential book *Thinking About Women* (1968), Mary Ellmann in an ironic tone discusses eleven stereotypes which are sometimes imposed on women's writing. Among these stereotypes is *confinement*. This stereotype accounts for values such as innocence, inexperience, and seclusion. According to Ellmann, this is the most common stereotype in criticism: That women's experience is too narrow; they do not understand the broader picture (92). This stereotype is apparent in the reviews from the nineteenth century and can to some extent be seen in relation to the separate spheres, in that women were confined to the home and domestic concerns. An example can be found in the *Atlantic Monthly*, where the critic thinks that a problem with the novels is the authors' "astounding ignorance of the motives, the words, and the ways of actual men and women" (135). Here the reviewer passes the same judgment on all the Brontë novels, even though they differ substantially. This review stands in clear contrast to a review of *Wuthering Heights* written by G. W. Peck in the *American Whig Review* in 1848. Here the critic thinks the author is male, and states that "the dialogue is [...] singularly effective and dramatic. The principal characters [...] stand before us as definite as so many individuals" (240).

Throughout, there is a striking difference between the reviews written before the Brontës' identities were known and after. The critic in the *American Whig Review*, who knew that the Brontës were women, may seem to contradict the stereotype of confinement when he writes that "the knowledge displayed of the springs of human conduct, is wonderful" (230), and "the life-like effect is indeed so great, that [...] no one doubts their existence" (230). As we read on, however, we realize that the knowledge of human conduct is only there when it comes to character traits of which the Brontës themselves were thought to be in possession. "A woman herself, she [Charlotte Brontë] cannot fully understand the feelings of men" (232), the critic writes, and "one defect running through these novels is the unintended refinement even in the coarser personages. Women seldom know [...] the full brutality, or rather brutishness, of bad men's hearts" (232). Again we can find different evaluations in the earliest reviews of the Brontë novels. When *Wuthering Heights* was first published, it was criticized for being too brutal. The critic in the American periodical *Graham's Magazine* writes in 1848 that "how a human being could have attempted such a book as the present without committing

suicide before he had finished a dozen chapters, is a mystery. It is a compound of vulgar depravity and unnatural horrors” (242-243). Many other critics also reacted to the novel’s brutality and coarseness, even when they thought the author was a man. The critic in the *American Whig Review*, however, criticizes the Brontës for not being able to understand brutality, and the reason for this is the simple fact that they are women. He stresses this point later in the review as well, stating that “these writers invariably fail in benevolent characters” (232), and “whatever is within the compass of their own varying moods, they can accurately and dramatically portray. Beyond that no one can go” (232). In contrast, the critic in the *North American Review* thinks that “it is true that the noblest and best representations of female character have been produced by men” (356). According to these critics, men are not confined to their own experiences, but are able to understand women, while women can only understand what they experience themselves. This can also be connected to the above-mentioned dichotomies, in that men, with their intellectual abilities, understand women, while women, being emotional rather than intellectual, cannot understand men. Clearly, the gender of the author becomes crucial in these reviews. Almost paradoxically, the Brontës are both seen as writing unfeminine books and, at the same time, the books become more feminine (less brutal) in the readers’ minds when they know the gender of the authors. The strong essentialist views of the period permeate the reviews. The writing is often explained by simply referring to the gender of the author.

That the gender of the author is important in the reviews is also apparent in relation to another stereotype which Mary Ellmann discusses, namely *formlessness*. This stereotype implies that soft body means soft mind: Women cannot structure their thoughts or sentences (Ellmann 74). The reviews indicate that formlessness indeed is a stereotype of women’s writing. In the *Atlantic Monthly*, the critic knows the authors’ identities and thinks their novels “contain grave lapses against perfection of form; they are full of hasty, diffuse, and extravagant writing” (135). Again, the critic chooses to discuss all the Brontë novels at the same time, and they all “contain grave lapses against perfection of form.” Later, and very much contrary to this, critics like Charles Percy Sanger and A. Stuart Daley have pointed out the very careful structuring of *Wuthering Heights*. Sanger discusses the pedigree of the families in the novel, and shows how it is absolutely symmetrical (1926). Daley shows how *Wuthering Heights* is structured both around time and place, with references in the novel to dates as well as to the moon (1974). This structure indicates that the formlessness the critic points out is rather a stereotype of women’s writing. The fact that he finds the same fault in all the novels also substantiates this argument. That formlessness was a common stereotype also

becomes clear in the *North American Review*, where the critic does not know that Currer Bell in fact is Charlotte Brontë. He speculates much on the identity of the author, and believes he has found evidence that *Jane Eyre* is mainly written by a man. The reason for this is that “the secret of its charm, is the clear distinct, decisive style of its representation of character, manners, and scenery; and this continually suggests a male mind” (356-357). The best part of the novel is the exact opposite of formless: It is clear and distinct, and these are seen as masculine traits.

The stereotype of formlessness can in fact be found in all three reviews. In the *American Whig Review* the critic knows the authors' identities. Even though he is on the whole positive toward the Brontë novels, he thinks that there are certain problems. Discussing *Shirley*, he states that “the author's constructive powers [were] unequal to the task. [...] Bulwer would have worked up the same materials to intense interest” (231). According to this critic the female writer Charlotte Brontë is unable to structure the novel in a satisfying way, while the popular male writer Edward Bulwer Lytton would have been able to do so. The critic is not entirely negative, however: “[Bulwer Lytton] never could have given utterance to the beautiful thought that was vainly struggling in the brain of the authoress of *Shirley*” (231). Again, the stereotypes are closely connected to the established binary oppositions. In the review above we not only see formlessness, but also the dichotomy between intellect versus emotion. What is also indicated in these examples is a point argued by Frances Bonner and Lizbeth Goodman, namely that “women writers are generally seen to be representative of all women while men are seen to be unique individuals” (3). The critics indeed see the Brontë sisters as one woman with the same faults rather than as individual authors.

The last stereotype I want to discuss is *materiality*. This implies that men understand the abstract better, while women are concerned with the concrete. According to Ellmann's satirical account, “grown women [...] are supposed to be like brain-damaged children, entirely absorbed in indiscriminate sensory impressions. This is understood to account for their persuasion by candy, perfume and flowers” (98). Thus, more important philosophical questions are only understood by men. This can again be seen in connection to the separate spheres, in that men were the ones who were supposed to deal with politics, society, and what were seen as the more important questions. In the *North American Review* the critic writes that *Jane Eyre* “might pass altogether as the composition of a man, were it not for some unconscious feminine peculiarities” (356). Among these peculiarities are “elaborate descriptions of dress, and the minutiae [sic] of the sick-chamber” (356). This is an example of

the stereotype of materiality: Women are concerned with details and “trivial” issues like clothing.

It is of course too simplistic to see these stereotypes only as ways to consciously denigrate women’s writing. In fact, like the dichotomies, the stereotypes were sometimes also seen as an advantage to women. An example can be found in W. L. Courtney’s study *The Feminine Note in Fiction* (1904) where he argues that female novelists succeed by “powers of minute observation applied to the scenes around them” and a “passion for detail” (Williams 31). Both confinement and materiality are apparent here, but not in an obviously negative sense. Still, although critics sometimes praised women for their attention to domestic detail, this somewhat patronising criticism at the same time implies a limitation in women’s writing, where their concerns and lives are seen as limited or inconsequential. Susan S. Williams argues that detailed observations were important for the American realist novel of the nineteenth century not just for women but also for men, exemplified in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) (Williams 33). But Williams goes on to argue that

In the American male tradition, observation is often occluded. [...] If observation is not occluded, it is used as a mode of emblem making. [...] Definitions of women’s authorship, on the other hand, focus on observation as its own end. [...] With the right models, observation of American manners, landscapes, and subjects could lead to a “manly” national literature, but it could also lead to a “mere” imitation of more “advanced” British literature. (34-35)

Williams’s argument illustrates how an author’s gender was influential when the American literary canon was established. The same elements in men’s and women’s books could be read differently because of the gender of the author. While it has often been argued that women’s literature has been absent from the American canon because of its sentimentality or domesticity, it is also important to note that not all books written by women were like this, and as we have seen some have been read as domestic or confined because of the authors’ gender. The specific tradition of women’s literature which was discussed in for instance Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) and Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of their Own* (1977) was very important in order to rediscover old works and redefine the literary canon. At the same time such separations can be dangerous as they border on essentialism, and ignore the significant influence male and female writers had on each other. Women’s literature has in modern times often been seen as political and carrying a message, while men’s literature has to a greater extent been viewed as timeless art. This can be problematic, and I will discuss this in greater detail in Chapter Three.

Despite the problems with the separate spheres logic, it is clear that women received different critical treatment from men during the nineteenth century. I have shown examples of how the dichotomies are apparent in the reviews, as well as how the stereotypes of confinement, formlessness, and materiality are manifested. Also, the reviews show that women's literature was viewed in a separate women's tradition, always judged against other female writers. In *Southern Literary Messenger*, Charlotte Brontë is called "the most powerful female writer of fiction" in English ("Notices of New Works" 253), and the *International Magazine* describes *Wuthering Heights* as "a more than usually interesting contribution to the history of female authorship in England" ("The Authoress" 816). Simone de Beauvoir's discussion of the second sex – that the male is seen as the norm in society while the female is seen as "the other" (15-16) – is relevant here. The literature written by men is clearly seen as the norm in the reviews, while women's writing is viewed as "the other." Similarly, Bonner and Goodman argue that "women, when they are creative or active, are taking positions normally occupied by men, and must be labelled accordingly. There are no 'male writers,' only 'writers' and 'women writers'" (3). The point here is that the female tradition is not just seen as different from male (and implicitly real) literature, it is also seen as inferior. Likewise, in the *North American Review*, the critic writes that *Jane Eyre* contains "some unconscious feminine peculiarities, which the strongest-minded woman that ever aspired after manhood cannot suppress" (356). Again we see that manhood and writing like a man is the norm to be strived for, while the female "peculiarities" are seen as elements imposed on the story, as "the other" which does not fit in. I will return to this aspect in my discussions of Margaret Atwood, who is often praised for "writing like a man."

"She would make a glorious lover, but a very uncomfortable wife"

There are also other examples of gendered criticism in the reviews, and toward the end of this chapter I will briefly mention two other instances: Reviewing the author rather than the book, and reading women's books as autobiography. That the critics to some extent are reviewing the Brontës themselves rather than the books should have become clear by the above statement about Emily Brontë, who would make "a glorious lover, but a very uncomfortable wife" (*American Whig Review* 234). Earlier in the review this is made explicit: "This mannerism gives us a complete daguerreotype of the writer. By her works do we know her" (233). The reviewer goes on to describe Charlotte Brontë as he imagines her:

Her temples, swelling with poesy and dramatic power, gleam white amid her curls. [...] A winning smile, not gentle, plays at times over her face. Her greeting is genial and heart-felt; a warm grasp of her little hand. [...] Neither is she a blue-stocking, that neuter gender of intellects. Her mind is simply masculine, bold, analytic and original. [...] Little humor has she, but much wit. (233-234)

About Emily Brontë he imagines that “dark and sad is her soul; a sullen fire is in her eye; her talk is cold and depressing” (234), and so on. The focus on the authors’ (imagined) appearance is of course a problem, and the reference to a blue-stocking who is viewed as genderless again reflects the perceptions of womanhood during the time. Furthermore, the implication is that women cannot invent: Their works accurately reflect who they are. This is closely connected to the tendency of reading women’s literature as autobiography, and can take authority away from the writer, who is only seen as able to write about her own experiences. The tendency to read women’s fiction as autobiography will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

It is important to note, however, that during the nineteenth century, the critics were not simply confusing the author and the characters. This was rather a conscious way of reading literature, an ideal of literary criticism. As one critic explains:

In the life of an author we are to search for the secret of his power. [...] When we criticise a work with no personal knowledge of the writer, we obtain an impartiality of judgment in some respects, at the expense of thorough and sympathetic understanding of his point of view, his qualifying circumstances and his personal enthusiasms and prejudices. [...] A perfectly impartial criticism is almost impossible. (“Charlotte Brontë,” *North American Review* 1857, 294-295)

This view of literary criticism is in fact highly relevant for the contemporary debate about the author. The critic’s view reminds us of feminists’ claim that no criticism is value free, and also how important the figure of the author is in literary criticism. As my thesis will show, an author’s name and background *are* important for how we read a work. Such focus on the author can certainly be defended in that it situates the author in her own time, and does not view the author as a genius who is somehow above society. Also, to focus on the female author has been important for feminists because it makes her a subject. At the same time, these autobiographical readings and the exaggerated focus on the author can be unfortunate, because they are closely linked to the stereotype of confinement, indicating that the author cannot invent but only reflects her own life. That this is an especially common way of looking at women’s literature becomes clear when the critic of the *North American Review* states that

“knowledge of the individual [is] always more necessary in judging of a woman’s comparative position than of a man’s, since her sphere of feeling is less rounded by external action” (“Charlotte Brontë” 297). The discussion of an author’s life must therefore be in order to illuminate aspects of the text rather than speculating on the appearance or feelings of the author. I will continue this discussion in more detail in the next chapters.

In the rest of my thesis I will regularly return to the aspects I have discussed in this chapter, such as the binary oppositions between men and women (for example intuition and emotion versus reason and intellect), the stereotypes of confinement, formlessness, and materiality, the tendency to read women’s works autobiographically and to focus on the author rather than the book.

Chapter 2. Margaret Atwood in the 1970s

In this chapter I will discuss the early reception of Margaret Atwood's first three novels *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), and *Lady Oracle* (1976). Margaret Atwood published her first collection of poetry *Double Persephone* in 1961, followed by the poetry collections *The Circle Game* (1964) and *The Animals in That Country* (1968). When her debut novel was published, Atwood was already a relatively famous poet in Canada, while her works were less known in the United States. Atwood's first three novels to some extent all deal with gender, and with the roles and expectations which are imposed on men and women. *Surfacing* is today seen as a feminist classic, and is taught in schools and universities in North America and elsewhere. It has also been an important book in Canada because of its national dimensions, as it is concerned with Canadian nature and identity. Atwood's third novel *Lady Oracle* also thematizes what has been viewed as specifically female issues, such as mother-daughter-relationships and feminine ideals of beauty. *Lady Oracle* differs from *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* when it comes to style. It may seem more straightforward and less complex, a point which will come up in some of the reviews.

Reviews from the 1970s are not easy to obtain, and I have considered the reviews I was able to find from major American newspapers and magazines of the period. The main criterion was that the publications would be read by many people and be influential in American society. The publications range from the relatively liberal the *New York Times* to the more mainstream *TIME Magazine*.⁶

I consider all three novels at once, as my focus here is on the reception rather than on formal aspects of the works. More reviews exist of *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle* than of *The Edible Woman*, probably because Atwood had become more famous when these novels were published. I will consider mainly four aspects of the reviews: Criticism in relation to the women's movement, Atwood's novels as "women's writing," the critical standards operating in the reviews, and how women's experiences sometimes are seen as less important than men's. I will also discuss the differences between the Brontë reviews and the reviews from the 1970s, and finally I will consider whether the critic's own gender is important for the

⁶ Because of the limited time, further detective work was not possible, and I also believe I have found sufficient material in the reviews under consideration. The reviews were found in the publications' Internet archives, as well as in the library at The University of Alberta (on microfilm and on the Intranet). Please consult the bibliography for further information.

content of the review. But first a short (and obviously sketchy) overview of the historical context in which these novels were published.

Historical context

Atwood's first three novels were published in the midst of the women's movement. Modern American feminism grew out of the civil rights movement and the counterculture of the 1960s, while also building on earlier women's struggles for equal rights.⁷ Many women who participated in the civil rights movement experienced a discrepancy between the values of equality they worked for, and the way they were treated as women in the movement. By the mid 1960s a large number of women had begun organizing themselves in order to achieve equal rights and opportunities for women as well. In 1966 The National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded, and later more radical organizations entered the stage. Among the founders of NOW was Betty Friedan, whose ground-breaking feminist text *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) argued that women were not satisfied with the role as housewives. This book was a great inspiration to many women, and women at this time also organized consciousness-raising groups, with the famous slogan that the personal is political. NOW and other feminist organizations worked to enforce the legislative changes of the period, such as the Equal Pay Act (1963), which meant equal pay for equal work, and title VII of the Civil Rights Act (1964), which barred discrimination for reasons of sex. In 1973 the Supreme Court Decision in *Roe vs Wade* made it illegal for states to interfere with abortion during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, another important milestone for many women. The feminism advocated by for instance NOW was mainly connected to the white upper and middle classes, and for instance black feminists argued that the causes for which the white feminists fought were not equally relevant to their own experiences. The women's movement was therefore a much more diverse movement than is often accounted for, although the reviews I will consider mainly seem to think of feminism as a uniform concept.

This was also the period when women's studies gradually became more widespread at colleges and universities, and feminist literary criticism exploded during this period. Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) were some of the influential books on women and literature which were published at the time. The stereotypes

⁷ My brief outline of historical events is built on Maier, Smith, Keyssar, and Kevles. *Inventing America*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003.

which were apparent in the early Brontë reviews came under attack, and feminist critics began questioning and revising the literary canon. Before the 1970s New Criticism and formalism had dominated literary criticism, with a focus on the autonomy of the text and how a work should be judged without regard to the author or the reader. As I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter, this view of literature was attacked by “culturalists” such as feminists and post-colonialists, who argued that the reader’s own background is important for how she reads a text. This period also saw a renewed debate about the author. In 1967 Roland Barthes declared the death of the author, meaning that one should not focus on the author when reading a work. “It is language which speaks, not the author” (126), Barthes argued, and that “to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (128-9). For feminists, questions of authorship have, as Seán Burke argues (145), primarily gone through three phases:

- The sponsorial phase, with “the assertion by the female author of the right of belonging to the state and estate of authorship” (Burke 145). Burke argues that the pseudonyms which for instance the Brontës felt impelled to use illustrate how “authorship had to be denied so as to be attained” (146).
- The revisionist phase, “the attempt to redefine authorship over and against the patriarchal model and to promote a counter-canon of female authors” (Burke 145). The works of Gilbert and Gubar and Showalter are examples of this.
- The theoretical phase, “the recognition that authorship and canonicity are inherently and inalienably patriarchal institutions which feminist thought should pass beyond” (Burke 145). This corresponds to Barthes’s wish of the death of the author, and implies that the author should not be taken into account when reading a text.

This debate about the author is central to my thesis, and will be elaborated on especially in Chapter Four. For now it is important to note that questions of authorship, as well as criticism and reception, were topical issues during the 1970s. Atwood’s first three novels were published in the midst of these radical changes, and I will now go on to consider how this manifests itself in the reviews.

“Margaret Atwood is, of course, a woman writer”

The impact of the women’s movement is evident in the reviews, and feminism and women’s liberation are touched upon by many critics. An example of this is found in Melvin Maddocks’s review of *The Edible Woman* in *Time Magazine*. Maddocks begins his review by stating that

“Sensibility” is the word of faint praise that customarily damns women novelists. Yes, they do manage their little nuances so well – those pale violet insights into rather unimportant feelings. Nice sense of humour, too – this side of real bite, though. Still, no man can match them at describing parties – if that’s what one really wants in a story. Will women writers, in other words, ever live down one of the world’s most overanthologized short stories, Katherine Mansfield’s “The Garden Party”? Sensibility incarnate! (“That Consuming Hunger” 26 Oct. 1970)⁸

This review illustrates how ideas about women’s writing and women’s sensibilities had become debatable as well as topical during the 1970s. The stereotypes we encountered in the Brontë reviews are discussed in an ironic manner, which indicates how these stereotypes are no longer seen as essentialist truths. Maddocks goes on to say that

in her remarkable first novel, the Canadian poet Margaret Atwood, 30, might appear to be safely in the Mansfield tradition, role playing at Woman Writer – “capital W, capital W” as Mary McCarthy has bitterly remarked. On its deceptive surface, *The Edible Woman* can be mistaken for an airy little comedy [...] But reader, beware. Behind this quiet, well-taught Garden Party-girl behavior, Atwood conceals the kick of a perfume bottle converted into a Molotov cocktail. (“That Consuming Hunger”)

The reviewer’s concern is again with the stereotypes normally imposed on women’s writing. His comment that Atwood can be seen to be “role-playing at Woman Writer” implies that Maddocks believes these stereotypes are constructs rather than something essential to the author’s gender. In this way Maddocks is critical toward the patronising praise we sometimes saw in the previous chapter, where women were seen to be naturally good at writing about so-called trivial issues and “unimportant feelings,” while men were thought to be the ones who could write about what really matters, such as society, economics, and politics. Maddocks’s review thereby problematizes the limitations which are sometimes placed on women and their

⁸ Since most of the reviews in this thesis have been found on the Internet, there are no page numbers in all of the references. I will however give the dates of publication, as this could be useful information for the reader. When the page numbers are known, I will provide these as well. For further information, please consult the bibliography.

writing, and he might be trying to make sure that Atwood's book will not be dismissed as a "woman's book" by emphasising that not all women should be thought to write in a so-called feminine manner.

Still, in some respects Maddocks's review can nevertheless be seen as problematic. Although he does not dismiss Atwood as a "woman writer," Maddocks at the same time implies that what is good about Margaret Atwood is that she is not a typical female writer. In the review it seems that short stories like Catherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" are seen as a lesser kind of literature, seemingly because it historically has been stereotyped and labelled. In fact "The Garden Party" is an "airy little comedy," while at the same time being central to a female literary tradition. Atwood breaks with this tradition and, as the "molotov cocktail" implies, is more macho, and thereby a better writer. Margaret Atwood herself saw this as typical praise critics gave her novels, and according to the *Winnipeg Free Press* she "does not take kindly to the title of 'honorary male' which she feels reviewers have subconsciously imposed upon her when evaluating her writing" (Bolton 12). I will return to this later when I discuss the critical standards at work in these reviews.

The review in *TIME Magazine* is illustrative of much of the criticism of the 1970s, in that the upheavals of the 1970s made many reviewers consciously comment on the stereotypes. The stereotypes still operate in the reviews, albeit in a different way from the 1850s. Another problematic aspect of Maddocks's review is that so much focus is on the author's gender and not on the novel. In the Brontë reviews we saw that from the beginning, critics speculated about the authors' gender, and, when the sisters' gender was revealed, the question often became whether the authors were feminine enough. Furthermore, the critics speculated about the appearance and lives of the authors. Although Atwood's personal life is left untouched in this review from 1970, the focus of the review is still on gender. Even though Maddocks goes on to discuss the novel, the first two paragraphs have firmly established in the reader's mind that the important aspect here is whether or not Atwood's novel is "typical women's writing." The literary qualities of the novel are thereby placed in the background. It becomes more difficult for Atwood to become a critically acclaimed writer when the novel's qualities drown in the discussion of gender and women's writing. This focus on gender is quite common in the reviews of the 1970s. Atwood is often discussed as a "woman writer," but seldom just as a writer. I will discuss the implications of the use of these categories later.

Still, it is important to consider that part of Atwood's fame has been connected precisely to this. From the beginning, feminists "adopted" Atwood as a feminist icon, and this

has clearly had a positive impact on her fame today. Although I do not want to diminish the importance of Atwood's hard work and her well-wrought novels, it is also important to consider how social and historical factors influence the fame and status of an author. Paradoxically, then, Atwood's gender has both led to unjust and gendered reviews as well as increased attention. This also reflects Atwood's ability to engage with and anticipate important developments in society (although *The Edible Woman* was published during the women's movement, it was written earlier). It is also important to note that Atwood is not simply a victim of gendered criticism but has continuously engaged with this criticism. I will develop this discussion of Atwood's fame in the next chapter.

Melvin Maddocks's review also reveals some important differences from the time of the Brontës. Susan Ehrlich and Ruth King argue that "even if gender-based language reform is not immediately and/or completely successful, it does sensitize individuals to ways in which language is discriminatory towards women" (170). Furthermore, they claim, together with Penelope, that "becoming aware of linguistic choices forces us to monitor our thought processes and 'will gradually enable us to unlearn patriarchal ways of thinking'" (170). Change seems to be in the making in this review, as the critic has become aware of the stereotypes. Although he might still focus on them, he at least acknowledges that they can be debatable. In the Brontë reviews the stereotypes were an integral part of society and could therefore be stated bluntly, while now they are reflected upon by the critic himself. This must be seen as a result of the women's movement, which made people aware of difficult aspects of language and criticism. Also, American society had of course changed in most aspects from the nineteenth century. Another example of how critics had become aware of the problems with stereotypes is found in the *Los Angeles Times*, one of the largest broadsheet newspapers in the United States.⁹ Here the critic Barbara Cady states that "unfashionable as it is to say it, *Lady Oracle* is definitely a 'woman's book'" (5 Dec. 1976, R14). Again, the women's movement has made the critic realize the troublesome aspects of this labelling. She still uses it, but at least she knows that there are problems attached to it. I will discuss this review and such labelling in more detail later.

A third review which shows us the impact of the women's movement can be found in one of the most influential newspapers in the world, namely the *New York Times*. Although the critic Millicent Bell focuses mostly on the novel, she also touches upon feminism and implicitly the gender of the author. Bell writes that *The Edible Woman* is "a work of feminist

⁹ The very brief descriptions of the newspapers and magazines in this thesis were found in Drost, Harry, ed. *The World's News Media: A Comprehensive Guide*. Harlow, UK: Longman Current Affairs, 1991.

black humor,” and goes on to say that “this may put the matter more blackly than one should. Miss Atwood’s comedy does not bare its teeth. It reads, in fact, like a contemporary ‘My Sister Eileen’” (18 Oct. 1970). The reviewer here implies that “feminist black humor” means boring writing. Fortunately, Atwood’s novel is not as sad as this might imply to the reader. The women’s movement was obviously a central topic for the American press, and the focus on feminism in the reviews can partly be seen as a result of this. The caricature of feminists as angry or humorless women was not uncommon, and the review above reinforces that stereotype in that feminists “bare their teeth.”

Six years later, Katha Pollitt reviewed *Lady Oracle* for the *New York Times*. Again, feminism is seen as a problem, and this time it is largely to blame for the failure of Atwood’s novel. Pollitt thinks the plot of *Lady Oracle* is improbable, and writes that “the zany narrative, [is] perhaps intended to spice a familiar tale of feminist woe” (26 Sept. 1976). The critic believes, then, that Atwood might have added the improbabilities so that the novel would not just be dull feminist writing. At the end of her review, Pollitt writes that what she sees as Atwood’s unsuccessful works, *Lady Oracle* and *The Edible Woman*, “offer us the stock figures and pat insights of a certain kind of popular feminist-oriented fiction” (ibid). Here it is difficult to know whether the critic reacts to feminism per se, or whether she is critical to what she sees as propagandist fiction. Also, what she seems to be reacting to is that Atwood is *feminist* rather than *female*. But there is a tendency to equate these terms in the criticism from the 1970s, in that Atwood is automatically seen as feminist because of her gender, even though her books cannot be seen as straightforwardly feminist. I will return to this.

In the conservative, biweekly magazine *National Review*, the critic undermines the women’s movement by implying that feminism is only a fashionable trend and not something of real importance. Discussing *Surfacing*, Patricia S. Coyne writes that “Miss Atwood has left off the passé practice of politicizing personal problems” (3 Aug. 1973, 852). Furthermore, “yesterday’s garden-variety women’s libber today sings songs to the sprouting corn. [...] Miss Atwood adds enough hard-core paganism to sell the paperback on campus” (852). What is implied here is that the concerns of Atwood’s novels are not serious; rather, she just tries to be trendy in order to sell novels. The review diminishes the importance of the women’s movement by seeing it as something women were involved in just like any other trend, but which has passed away like platform shoes. The stereotype of materiality which I discussed in the previous chapter can be seen as related to this. This stereotype indicates that women are only concerned with what are seen as trivial issues, like perfume and clothes. But the stereotype can also be taken to mean that people trivialise important issues because the issues

are seen as feminine. As Rochelle Gatlin argues, the term “women’s libber” was also used in the media to trivialise the term women’s liberation (128). The same term is found in the New York City-based magazine *Commonweal*, where the reviewer Margaret Wimsatt states that “the fem lib ladies will be along” when they read Atwood’s book (7 Sept. 1973, 484).

The *National Review*’s dismissal of Atwood’s novel and its concerns is also detected when the critic Coyne states that “it [*Surfacing*]’s a trendy book [...]. Miss Atwood has not risen above transient current enthusiasms, and in fifty years *Surfacing* will have all the pull of *Prudence of the Parsonage*” (3 Aug. 1973, 852). *Prudence of the Parsonage* (interestingly also a novel written by a woman) is viewed as a popular but soon forgotten novel. This is another example of how both feminism and Atwood’s novel could be presented as insignificant, as fads. Discussing the status of feminism in the academy, scholar Carolyn G. Heilbrun stated in 1972 that “I, thirty years girl and woman in the field of English studies, wonder anew that among all the changes of ‘the life and thought of our age,’ only the feminist approach has been scorned, ignored, fled from, at best reluctantly embraced” (22). Feminists in all fields reacted to how their works were reduced and seen as inconsequential. In *National Review* we see that not only is feminism seen as trivial, but so is Atwood’s novel.

An important aspect to consider here, however, is whether the reviewers are criticising feminism and the women’s movement or whether they are reacting to a certain kind of literature, i.e. didactic literature, literature with a clear “message.” In modern literary criticism there has often been a separation between society and art, in that real art is supposed to be timeless and elevated above current issues. The critics reacting to Atwood’s novels as “trendy” might also imply that she is too concerned with the topical issue of feminism, and that this separates her works from timeless art and devalues them. This distinction will become crucial in the reviews of *Oryx and Crake* in the next chapter, and I will therefore postpone the discussion until that chapter. What is also vital to note here however is that Atwood’s books cannot be seen as straightforwardly feminist. For example, *Surfacing* was sometimes criticised by feminists as well, primarily because the protagonist regrets her abortion (Ingersoll 80). In the reviews there seem to be a tendency to read Atwood’s books as explicitly feminist because of Atwood’s gender and the time in which the books are written. The tendency to read women’s books as more political than men’s is something I will discuss further in the next chapter. For now it is important to note that Atwood’s works in the reviews are seen as very political (feminist) and that this clearly relates to her gender.

Although the reviewers might implicitly react to literature with a message, these reviews also show us the problems feminists struggled with from the beginning, and perhaps

especially during the women's movement of the 1960s and 70s. Even though many people agreed with many of the issues raised by the women's movement, feminists could also be caricatured in newspapers as negative, humorless, and angry women. Nijole V. Benokraitis and Joe R. Feagin, writing in 1995, argue that "indicting women, and especially feminists, sells newspaper and magazines" (13-14). They name three reasons why antifeminism is so popular: "Ingrained attitudes about women's and men's 'proper' roles, fear of losing status or resources, and the persisting institutionalization of gender inequality" (14). An important reason during the 1970s was probably that many women who worked as housewives felt that feminists implied that their lives were not good enough. Also, feminism in a number of ways threatened the entire structure of American society. Here we must however also realize that many people were positive to the changes, and that the issue is far more complicated than I might have given the impression of. The newspapers cannot simply be seen as either shaping or reflecting public opinion. Furthermore, "feminism" is in itself a broad term. By the way in which it is used in the reviews it clearly refers to white middle-class feminism, and considering the readership of the newspapers I have discussed, as well as Atwood's background, this is not surprising. In this way, the reviews indicate how crucial the situatedness of the reader is for how a work is perceived. Since feminism was such a topical issue in American society at the time, the critics inevitably discuss Atwood's novels in relation to this. Still, the point remains that the critics to a great extent consider feminism and women's writing as trivial, and this can clearly be seen as a problem for female authors like Atwood.

Furthermore, writers like Margaret Atwood, who were connected to the women's movement, were often not viewed as writers as much as feminists or "women writers." We can see this in another otherwise gender-neutral review: The critic David H. Rosenthal in the liberal weekly magazine the *Nation* writes that "Margaret Atwood is, of course, a woman writer" (19 Mar. 1973, 374). The corresponding sentence "x is, of course, a man writer" would seem very strange. But such labelling concerning female writers is very common, and is, as I discussed in the previous chapter, a way of setting them apart from male or "real" literature. The repeated focus on the women's movement and Atwood's gender means that Atwood's novels are not judged by their literary merits as much as by their connection to this movement and tradition. In this respect, a novel which is connected to feminism seems, at least initially, to have a much harder time of being acknowledged as interesting writing or great literature.

“She is Hemingway in darkest Africa; she is not a Smith young lady”

As we have seen in the *TIME Magazine* review, and as I will return to, several of the critics from the 1970s compare Atwood’s novels to other novels written by women. This raises several questions. Is there such a thing as feminine and masculine writing? Is it unfortunate in itself to compare female authors and claim that they have their own tradition? Or does it only become troublesome when one places the traditions in a hierarchy, claiming that one is better than the other? Hélène Cixous and others have claimed that such a hierarchization is inevitable in our society, so that as you separate a female literary tradition from a male (and implicitly normative) one, you immediately claim that the male tradition is superior (Cixous “Sorties” 264-265).

When discussing these issues it can be useful to return to the nineteenth century and consider the genre of sentimental literature. As I touched upon in the previous chapter, many female abolitionists, most famously Harriet Beecher Stowe, wrote in this genre. It has been seen as a specifically female form of writing because it was mainly used and read by women. Even though many of these narratives were extremely popular in their own time, practically none of them are part of the literary canon today. The genre of sentimental writing has not been regarded as serious literature. From the 1970s onwards, feminists like Jane Tompkins have tried to restore this genre by taking these works seriously. Tompkins claims that these narratives might indeed be different from the (male) norm, but that this does not mean that they are inferior (*Sensational Designs*). The problem, then, is not that critics regard works in a specifically female context or compare female writers. Problems arise when this comparison is made in order to prove the inferiority of the work, however implicitly, and when the implied meaning of “women’s literature” is not just different but inferior.

Two reviews of Atwood’s *Surfacing* illustrate this point. They both compare *Surfacing* to Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963). This comparison has also been used by later scholars and feminists, and is not unnatural. It would therefore be wrong to state that comparing these novels in itself is sexist. The question is rather which effect this comparison is meant to achieve in the reviews. In *Commonweal*, the critic Margaret Wimsatt makes this comparison but goes on to say that the comparison is “unjust”: “Margaret Atwood’s [talent] is of another order. There are comparisons that help understand Atwood, but they are all rugged and ‘masculine.’ [...] She is Hemingway in darkest Africa; she is not a Smith young lady” (7 Sept. 1973, 483). Smith College is a women’s college which Sylvia Plath as well as the main character in *The Bell Jar* attended. Wimsatt can see some similarities between *Surfacing* and

The Bell Jar, but claims that Atwood should not be compared to Plath, she must instead be compared to more masculine authors like Hemingway. Even though she does not state it explicitly, the praise she then goes on to give Atwood's novel implies that she finds this "masculine" writing more interesting than Plath's "feminine" writing. The comparison between the novels is used to highlight the positive aspects of Atwood as different from Plath. What the terms "masculine" and "feminine" writing imply is not elaborated upon. Still, the issue of gender is pervasive throughout the review, and Atwood and the novel's main character (who are seen as the same person) are compared to Humphrey Bogart. In this review the comparison between Plath and Atwood is clearly problematic, as it is used to emphasise the positive aspects of "male" writing.

In the *New York Times*, the reviewer Paul Delany writes that "Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* invites comparison with Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*" (4 Mar. 1973), and claims that the main difference between the novels is that Atwood's ends on a more positive note, the main character in *Surfacing* is able at the end to "come up for air, to move confidently out of the destructive element and into freedom" (ibid). The comparison here relates directly to the works and the similarities and differences between them, and is meant to give the reader an insight into Atwood's novel. Gender is discussed as far as it is related to the subject matter of the novels, but is not used to pass judgment on them. While placing Atwood in a tradition of female writers, the review cannot be seen as gendered in a negative sense. Rather, the comparison with Plath's novel seems to be made because *The Bell Jar* is seen as a great novel which everybody should have read.¹⁰

This kind of comparison of novels written by women can actually have a positive effect, in that it creates a critical discourse around women's works. An example of this is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), which was not taken seriously until the 1970s, when feminists created a critical discourse around the work and discussed the novel's meaning and importance. Today, *Frankenstein* is regarded as a literary classic and has become part of the canon. Texts like *Frankenstein* have earlier been regarded as what Laurie A. Finke calls "cultural noise, ephemeral texts that supposedly lack the universality and permanence of canonical texts" (28). The recovery of these texts both helps to create a tradition of women's literature as well as to challenge the standards of the canon. To return to my previous

¹⁰ In an interview in 1978 Margaret Atwood expressed her own opinion on why people compared her to Sylvia Plath: "For a while Sylvia Plath took the place of Emily Dickinson. You could tell when someone had read only one or two women poets. They would either say that you were like Emily Dickinson or you weren't like Emily Dickinson. Then they were saying that you were like Sylvia Plath or that you weren't like Sylvia Plath" (Ingersoll 70). The reviews from the 1970s which often compare Atwood to either Plath or a male author might indicate that she has a point.

discussion, this means that drawing attention to and comparing works written by women do not need to imply inferiority or be unfortunate. The discussion of the works must, however, be made with the intention of exploring these works as literature and not to discuss them only because of the authors' gender.

Relating to the reviews from the 1970s, we see that several of the reviewers use comparison with other female authors in order to pass value judgments on Atwood's works. Most of the critics see the object of comparison as an example of feminine and implicitly inferior writing. When Atwood's novel is compared to novels written by men, however, the male novel is always presented as a positive comparison. In the *Chicago Tribune*, one of the high-quality newspapers in the United States, the reviewer Jane Kramer writes that *Lady Oracle* is "a very funny book, but there is not much recognition in the laughter it inspires. Joyce could take the everyday, the merely human, and make it awesome" (14 Nov. 1976, F3), and furthermore that "Joan/Louisa [in *Lady Oracle*], written with less strident showmanship, could have made a fine, funny, gritty heroine, a kind of grownup female Holden Caulfield" (F3). The critic chooses two male writers to illustrate how Atwood could have done better. This is seen even more clearly in the *Los Angeles Times*'s review of *Lady Oracle*, which I will discuss in more detail later.

The problems which the Brontë sisters faced are still visible in the 1970s, in that "women's literature" often means inferior literature. There are certain differences, however. When it became clear that the Brontës' novels were written by women, the books were suddenly seen as more unstructured or emotional. In Atwood's reviews she is often seen as both structured and objective. This does not mean that women generally do not write emotional novels, however, it just means that Atwood is especially good because of her more "masculine" style. I will now move on to discuss the implications of these critical standards.

"Her writing has always been objective and distant"

Margaret Atwood's novels are reviewed favourably in many of the newspapers and magazines. It is perhaps particularly revealing to look at why reviewers like her books. As already discussed, her "masculine" writing is appreciated in many reviews. In the relatively liberal the *Washington Post*, the reviewer William McPherson praises *Lady Oracle*, writing that "it is [...] a very funny novel, lightly told with wry detachment and considerable art. [...] Its plot is complicated but the novel is never confusing" (26 Sept. 1976, 153). The critic likes *Lady Oracle* because it is detached (as opposed to emotional), and complicated (rather than

straightforward). As I will return to, these positive characteristics correspond to the male sides of the dichotomies discussed in the previous chapter.

To illustrate my discussion, I will briefly look at two reviews in the *Winnipeg Free Press*, a large Canadian newspaper. These reviews are especially interesting because it is the same critic who reviews both *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle*. Perry Nodelham writes in his review that “*Lady Oracle* is frivolous, sloppy, and silly” (“The Art of Flabby Writing” 4 Sept. 1976, 17). He finds the novel a disappointment, because Atwood’s previous novels have all had one quality in common and “the quality is control. [...] Her writing has always been objective and distant.” He also calls *Lady Oracle* “trashy and essentially melodramatic.” At the same time, Nodelham “cannot deny that I enjoyed the novel” (ibid). Still, he does not like it. The positive characteristics of a novel are again objective, controlled, and it describes love as “if it were a game of chess between two crazed Ph.D.’s specializing in nuclear warfare” (ibid). A bad novelist is melodramatic, and writes about love in “sloppy sentiment[s]” (ibid).

A comparison of this review with Nodelham’s review of *Surfacing* four years earlier tells us much about the critical standards in literary criticism. In the earliest review he claims that *Surfacing* is like two novels:

The first of these novels is a genuine horror. It is your typical poet’s novel, filled with too much self-pity, too many pretty sensitively perceived landscapes. [...] Then, the other novel happens. [...] The reader is forced to reinterpret everything he has been told. The result once the reader realizes what has been happening, is a brilliant tour-de-force. The danger is the 140 pages it takes to get that far. [...] *Surfacing* is a brilliant novel. (“Two Novels in One” 18 Nov. 1972, 21)

The critic finds *Surfacing* boring and “a genuine horror” for the first 140 pages. Still, he thinks it is a brilliant novel. *Lady Oracle*, on the other hand, he enjoyed reading, but does not think is a good novel. Words like “fun” or “exciting” are seldom part of a critic’s vocabulary. A good novel is supposed to be difficult to understand, and objective rather than subjective. Literary criticism has historically tried to appear as an objective “science,” with standards that are universal. Feminists have argued that these standards are constructed by the patriarchy, and are made to suit the style of male writers. Thus, the standards represent the male parts of the dichotomies: Novels should be objective (not subjective), complex (not simplistic), and rational (not emotional). Irony and distance are valued over sentimentality. Tompkins’s discussion of sentimental literature again seems useful in this context. She writes that:

The very grounds on which sentimental fiction has been dismissed by its detractors, grounds that have come to seem universal standards of aesthetic judgment, were established in a struggle to supplant the tradition of evangelical piety and moral commitment these novelists represent. In reaction against their world view, and perhaps even more against their success, twentieth-century critics have taught generations of students to equate popularity with debasement, emotionality with ineffectiveness, religiosity with fakery, domesticity with triviality, and all of these, implicitly, with womanly inferiority. (123)

The “universal” standards of judgement Tompkins discusses are exactly the standards we see in the reviews of the 1970s. These standards have become so pervasive that they are taken for granted in the reviews. As I will return to in the next chapter, this has implications not just for much writing by women, but also for a number of literary genres. It is also interesting how *Lady Oracle* itself can be seen to comment on these standards. The protagonist Joan Foster writes costume gothics using a pseudonym, because she does not want the world to know she writes these “trashy” books. Her bestselling book of poetry “Lady Oracle,” on the other hand, is very complex. This book was written through “automatic writing,” where Foster stared into a light in a mirror until the words wrote themselves on the page in front of her. *Lady Oracle* is self-reflexive, it seems to comment on these different types of literature, questioning whether one is really better than the other. This aspect is not mentioned in any of the reviews, which instead often focus on how the novel and the characters are not complex enough.

Female writers, then, may face two complementary problems when their novels are reviewed. Firstly, their novels might be called melodramatic or too emotional just because the author is a woman. This problem was especially evident in the reviews of the Brontë novels, and is less apparent in the reviews from the 1970s. Secondly, melodramatic novels are sometimes seen as inferior simply because of their genre, which does not conform to the critical standards. I believe that it is wrong both to automatically devalue a novel because of its emotional, subjective, or melodramatic aspects (so-called feminine attributes) *and* to imply that this is the way women write. Such generalizations are dangerous. There can indeed be a difference between men’s and women’s writing. This difference does however not concern all authors. It results from the different experiences men and women have in society. Some authors, like Erica Jong, often write about specifically female experiences, and they call attention to issues of gender in their works. Margaret Atwood’s first three novels also concern issues which are specific to women, such as motherhood and feminine ideals of beauty. But what is important to realize is that not all books written by women concern such gender-

specific issues. Also, writers who do write about such issues should be discussed as writers, and not be seen in a sub-category of “women writers” or feminists.

It is also crucial to realize that women (as well as men) have very different experiences due to where they come from and their background. This has been argued by for instance black feminists, who demonstrate that the causes and experiences which the white middle-class feminists fight for or write about are not equally relevant to their own experiences. Another danger in generalizing about women’s literature, then, is that it excludes minorities. Similarly, such generalizations imply that “women” is a uniform category resulting in one specific type of literature.

A goal of criticism must be not just to evaluate each work separately and regardless of the gender (or race) of the author, but also for the critic to be aware of his or her own critical standards. As we have seen, Atwood, and by extension other female writers, have suffered from the repeated focus on their gender. As I will now discuss, works which concern women and women’s experiences may also be seen as inferior simply because of their subject matter.

“Definitely a ‘woman’s book’”

I have argued that there *can* be a difference between how (some) men and women write, in that the subject matter may concern gendered issues like motherhood (or fatherhood), or the specific experience of being a woman or a man. This does not imply that the work cannot be read or enjoyed by both sexes. The problem for women who write about specifically female issues, however, has sometimes been that their works have been seen as unimportant. The review of *Lady Oracle* in the *Los Angeles Times* is very telling in this respect. Barbara Cady writes that *Lady Oracle* “is definitely a ‘woman’s book’” (5 Dec. 1976, R14). She begins her review by comparing Atwood’s novel to Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969), and writes that

The closeted escapades of Alexander Portnoy [...] titillated millions with its insights into emerging sexuality. And although it dealt primarily with the secret life [...] of the male adolescent, it thrilled (and one might add, informed) women as well as men. *Lady Oracle*, Margaret Atwood’s new novel, unfortunately does not have the appeal to both sexes that Philip Roth’s pubescent classic does. (R14)

Cady goes on to say that

Joan repeatedly flashes back to her youth [...]. It is in these reminiscences – filled with dance recitals, “chubette” clothes and four-Kleenex trips to matinee movies – that the author will lose her male audience. (R14)

These statements may seem to imply that Cady does not think a woman’s childhood and adolescence are as important as a man’s. While men’s lives are thrilling for women, men will not be interested in a woman’s life. The stereotype of materiality, which I discussed in the previous chapter, is at play here as well: A woman’s childhood consists of trivial and uninteresting issues like dancing and clothes.

The critic in the *Los Angeles Times* wants Atwood to change the content of her novels so that they become more “masculine.” This becomes clear near the end of the review, when Cady states that

unlike Portnoy, whose repressed adventures were as exciting to females as they were common to males, young Joan’s more lustful dreams center around the scantily clad figure of Mercury on the cover of the phone book. Among the highlights of her sexual flowering – teenager Joan tips the scales at almost 200 pounds – is when her girlfriend’s rejected suitor gets down on his knees and buries his sorrowful head in Joan’s generous stomach. Not exactly hard-core stuff. (R14)

In order for a novel to be successful and attract a male audience, then, it seems that sex must be discussed more like pornography, or “hard-core stuff,” and not in connection with an overweight girl. The entire review is concerned with how this novel does not satisfy men. The overall effect of the review is to state that men’s issues and concerns are more important than women’s, and that women should write about subject matter which would satisfy men. Cady also implies that learning about men is informative and useful for women, while learning about women and their sexuality could not possibly be useful for men. The review also stereotypes men by stating that they would not be interested in issues which do not directly concern them or that are not “hard-core.” Another important effect of the review is that it probably discourages some men from buying the book, and in this way hurts both Atwood personally and women who write more generally.

As already discussed, this trivialising of women’s issues was also seen in other reviews, such as *National Review* which characterized the women’s movement as a trend, and *TIME Magazine* where the reviewer thought that so-called traditional women’s literature was more like an “airy little comedy.” In the 1970s, then, women still struggled with how their works, lives, and opinions sometimes were seen as inconsequential.

What has changed since the nineteenth century?

Whereas the dichotomies and stereotypes to a great extent were seen as natural, biological differences between the sexes during the nineteenth century, the reviews from the 1970s indicate a more ambivalent view of these stereotypes, in that the critics often reflect on the stereotypes themselves. Examples of the “old” stereotypes can be found, for instance in *TIME Magazine*’s review of *Surfacing*, where the critic Melvin Maddocks writes that Atwood is “the mistress of controlled hysteria” (“Out of the Woods” 19 Mar. 1973). Another of the stereotypes Ellmann discusses is apparent here, namely instability (82). Traditionally, hysteria was viewed as a female illness, and women who did not conform to the expected gender roles risked being viewed as hysterics. This is however one of the very few examples from the 1970s of the obvious stereotypes found in the Brontë reviews.

A more common example of gendered criticism in the 1970s which was also found in the 1850s is that Atwood is confused with her characters. In *Commonweal* the critic Margaret Wimsatt discusses the main character of *Surfacing*, and states “this lady, this person, our author” (7 Sept. 1973, 483). The critic simply assumes that Atwood is writing about herself. In the Boston-based newspaper the *Christian Science Monitor* critic Diana Rowan writes that

where the author once felt “there are hordes of me ... / alike and paralyzed” and where her feelings for others were just as fragmented (“I love you by sections...”) she can now make a powerful statement for wholeness at the end of *Surfacing*: “This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing.” (24 Nov. 1976, 27)

The critic describes Atwood’s feelings by referring to lines from her earlier poetry as well as from *Surfacing*, an obvious mix-up between Atwood herself and the narrators in her works. Later, the critic states that “the book itself seems a stage, on which the author exercises [...] the old demons and nameless shades of childhood, turning them into rabbits and amusing stunts to drain them of the terror they once held” (27). The childhood recollections in the novel are taken to be Atwood’s own traumas. The *Washington Post*’s review of *Lady Oracle* and *TIME Magazine*’s review of *Surfacing* also draw parallels between Atwood and her characters. Atwood herself discusses this in an interview from 1978, stating that “it doesn’t happen as much to men as it does to women, probably because women are viewed as more subjective and less capable of invention” (“Margaret Atwood: Poet”). The stereotype of confinement, which says that women are confined to their own experiences, is still present in the 1970s. The female writer loses authority in that she is not seen as capable of expressing

anything other than what she has experienced herself. While one might argue that to discuss an author can be positive in that it situates the author in her own time, this is clearly not what is happening here. Rather, the critics are only speculating on Atwood's feelings and motives and simply assume that she is writing about herself. I will return to this discussion in Chapter Four.

Another similarity between the reviews of the 1850s and the 1970s is that what is seen as "masculine" writing is the most highly regarded form of writing. The greatest difference is that in the 1970s it seems more acceptable and thinkable that women can write according to these standards. Atwood receives many positive reviews. But she is often admired because she writes in a "masculine" manner. For the Brontës, their books were to a greater extent seen as emotional or unstructured as soon as the authors' gender was known. This is not the case with Atwood, who is praised, but sometimes not so much as a good writer, than as a woman who can "write like a man."

Men's gendered criticism?

Approximately half of the reviews I have considered were written by women. Interestingly, these reviews were no less gendered than the ones written by men. This supports Joanna Russ's statement from 1972 that "both men *and women* in our culture conceive the culture from a single point of view – the male" (4). In fact, the one review I found where it was impossible to detect any gendered criticism at all was written by Paul Delany in the *New York Times* (4 Mar. 1973). Conversely, one of the most gendered reviews I found was written by a woman. As discussed earlier, Barbara Cady in the *Los Angeles Times* disliked *Lady Oracle* mainly because it is "a woman's book" and will therefore not be liked by men. Instead, Philip Roth's more macho *Portnoy's Complaint* is thrilling for both sexes, as well as informative for women (5 Dec. 1976, R14). The stereotypes which feminists as well as female writers faced in the 1970s seem to be a structural problem in society itself, and not just attitudes held by a few individuals or only by men.

Similarly, it would be natural to assume that the more mainstream publications like *TIME Magazine* would be more gendered in their reviews than for instance the *New York Times*. As we have seen, however, gendered language is found in practically all the reviews. The critics in *Time Magazine* use a more straightforward language, with shorter sentences and paragraphs. But the more complex reviews from other magazines and newspapers are nonetheless also problematic from a feminist perspective. Scepticism toward feminism as well

as women's writing repeats itself throughout the reviews. Again, this points to how these attitudes were widespread in society. It also indicates that feminism was one of the most topical issues during the 1970s, in that practically all the critics reflect on Atwood's gender and/or her connection to the women's movement. We should also note, however, that the publications I have discussed are overall quite similar in their format, seriousness, and profiles.

It is not surprising to find that there have been changes in criticism from the 1850s to the 1970s. The women's movement meant an increased focus on the stereotypes attached to women's writing. Still, gender was a factor when women's novels were reviewed also in the later decade, in that the critics focused on feminism instead of on the novels, and many of them portrayed feminism, women's writing, and women's experiences as less interesting or important than men's. In the next chapters I will consider how the situation is today, by looking at two of Atwood's contemporary books: *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *Moral Disorder* (2006).

Chapter 3. *Oryx and Crake*

In this chapter I will discuss the reception of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003). In 2003 Margaret Atwood had become a famous and critically acclaimed writer, a status confirmed by her winning the Booker Prize for *The Blind Assassin* in 2001. Her fame is important for the recent reviews of her books, and in this chapter I will therefore also explore what I believe has made Atwood so famous.

Oryx and Crake is a novel concerned with genetic engineering. The protagonist Jimmy, or Snowman as he later calls himself, is (seemingly) the last person on earth. The human race has been wiped out because of genetic engineering, and has been replaced by the Crakers, "perfected" humans created by Jimmy's best friend Crake. Since *Oryx and Crake* deals with what might happen in the future, it can be called a science fiction novel. The genre of the novel is central to many of the reviews, and will therefore also be discussed in this chapter.

What makes *Oryx and Crake* especially interesting in our context is that it is not to an obvious extent concerned with gender issues. Certain aspects of the novel can be viewed as feminist; Coral Ann Howells for instance gives a very interesting discussion on how Atwood dissolves binary oppositions such as art and science in the book (Howells 172). Still, gender is certainly not the main issue of the novel. Furthermore, the two main characters (including the narrator) in *Oryx and Crake* are male, and the reviews might therefore be expected to be either concerned with the fact that a female author is writing about male characters, or one might expect no gendered criticism at all. I will begin this chapter by considering the reviews in light of these expectations, and in this I will include a discussion of Atwood's fame. I will also continue the analysis from the previous chapter of the literary standards evident in the reviews, and I will discuss the importance of genre. Finally, I want to examine what has changed from the nineteenth century as well as from the 1970s, and also how the gender of the critics might affect the reviews.

In order to make the comparison with the reviews from the 1970s as relevant as possible, I have again used reviews from the largest and most influential American newspapers and magazines. As more reviews were accessible from 2003 than from the 1970s, I have used a somewhat broader selection than in the previous chapter.¹¹

¹¹ The reviews for the two last chapters were found in the newspapers' own archives on the Internet, as well as through HighBeam Research (<http://www.highbeam.com>) and Newslibrary.com (<http://www.newslibrary.com>). Please consult the bibliography for further information.

“The ‘star text’ that is Margaret Atwood”

In the reviews of *Oryx and Crake* there is practically no mention of Atwood’s gender at all. It is in fact striking how little the critics comment on Atwood’s gender. This is her first work where the protagonist is a man, and as we have seen, she has often been discussed in relation to her feminism. But this is hardly noted. This ungendered criticism may most likely be attributed to three factors: Changes in society since the 1970s, the subject matter of *Oryx and Crake*, and, most importantly, Atwood’s fame. While Atwood’s gender is on the whole not discussed in the reviews, there is no doubt that the reviewers are influenced by the name of the author. Now, however, the name Margaret Atwood no longer means “woman writer” but has a signification of its own. I will discuss this in more detail below, but since Atwood’s fame is so central to her later reception, I will begin by considering what I believe has made her so famous.

In one of the many scholarly books written about Atwood, Lorraine York discusses “the ‘star text’ that is Margaret Atwood” (29). “Star text” is a concept thought of by Richard Dyer, and it refers to the multiple meanings we assign to stars. During the 1970s, Margaret Atwood was not a literary celebrity and, as we have seen, her name often equalled “woman writer.” Today, “Margaret Atwood” has its own signification, or “star text status,” consisting amongst others of her 12 novels, 15 books of poetry, as well as several collections of short fiction, non-fiction, children’s books, and cartoons/drawings. Furthermore, her “star text” includes Canadian nationalism, feminism, and her physical appearance, with her curly hair which has led to her being spoken of as “Medusa.” There are also Atwood’s interviews, the book reviews she has written in for instance the *New York Times*, the film and opera versions of her novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and the international Margaret Atwood Society, dedicated to Atwood research.

In our context, it is important to consider Atwood as an American “star text,” which is different from how she is seen in Canada. In Canada, the view of Atwood as a nationalist and the “Queen of Canadian Literature” (another gendered designation she has reacted against) has arguably been what has been most prevalent in her “star text.” Only relatively recently have the Canadians created their own literary canon. The first *Literary History of Canada* appeared in 1965, and Atwood as both a writer and a scholar participated in the establishment of this canon. Her non-fictional work *Survival* (1972) was one of the first books to discuss Canadian literature, and it was an easily accessible account which was widely read in Canada. Furthermore, her novel *Surfacing* was seen as a nationalistic text in a Canadian context.

Atwood has herself pointed out how Canadian reviews of the novel were mainly concerned with nationalism, while as we have seen, in the United States the “women’s question” was more important (Ingersoll 75). Also, Atwood’s sharp comments about Canadian national politics helped propel her into fame in her own country. In the United States, however, this nationalist aspect is not that relevant to Atwood’s stardom. In her study of the teaching of Atwood’s literature in American schools and universities, Caroline Rosenthal discovered that Atwood’s nationality was often not even mentioned: “Famous Canadians do not become *international* in the US but *American*” (46). Also, Sharon Wilson’s research has shown that “teachers and students in the United States are sometimes unaware of her poetry and literary criticism” (1).

In the United States, I believe Atwood’s high status can be traced back to five main reasons. As I have argued, to see canonical writers only as geniuses who are somehow above society is too simplistic. Atwood’s status has also been established by other factors. Firstly, Atwood was early on “adopted” by feminists, who saw her as one of their spokeswomen. Her first novels coincided with the rise of the women’s movement, and feminist research on these novels, and especially *Surfacing*, helped establish her as an influential writer. Later, the bestselling *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) quickly became a classic feminist text. Furthermore, part of Atwood’s appeal has been how she has used a variety of genres (science fiction, poetry, short stories, the gothic, the romance, children’s books, non-fiction etc) and her texts can be “used” by a great variety of what Stanley Fish calls “interpretive communities” (such as feminists, nationalists, ecologists). Likewise, *The Handmaid’s Tale* was adopted not only by feminists but also by science fiction scholars, who wanted to make the science fiction genre more respectable. Thirdly, Atwood was as we have seen viewed as “a woman who could write like a man,” and her texts were praised for being ironic, subtle, detached, and complex. Her wit and lack of sentimentality are among the aspects of her texts which have been most appreciated, in accordance with the most valued modernist standards of writing. Furthermore, the quality of Atwood’s writing has been an important reason for her success. *The Handmaid’s Tale* quickly became an international bestseller, and is taught in US colleges in subjects as diverse as economics, political science, sociology, film, and business (Rosenthal 42). Adding to this, Atwood’s ability to shape her own “star text” through her outspokenness and non-fictional texts (not only on Canadian literature but also on for instance environmental issues and materialism), this would explain much of her recognition and fame in the United States today. Furthermore, Atwood has also responded to her reception within her literary texts, in that she has been difficult to pin down. While some of her books clearly can be seen

as feminist, they are at the same time never straightforward. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, one example of this concerns how the protagonist in *Surfacing* regrets her abortion, something which was viewed as a betrayal by some feminists (Ingersoll 80). Also, the many unpleasant female characters in Atwood's novels make it difficult to attack her through one specific label. In his discussion of Charles Dickens, Steven Connor reaches a similar conclusion when he argues that "the value of the work lies precisely in the ways in which it refuses to be assimilated wholly and entirely to any of the cultural programmes which it so irresistibly attracts" (31). What has made both Dickens and Atwood enduring and famous authors, then, has partly been how they both engage with and simultaneously problematize cultural and political issues.

Furthermore, Connor elaborates on Virginia Woolf and argues that because of the author's fame, "all readings of Dickens are, from the beginning, rereadings" (31). Although Atwood of course is not as famous as Charles Dickens, a similar point can be made about her in relation to the reviews of *Oryx and Crake*, because the critics read not only *Oryx and Crake* but infuse it with Atwood's earlier works as well as with the image they have of Atwood. While Atwood's books during the 1970s often were compared to men's novels or Sylvia Plath's, Atwood is now predominantly compared to or discussed in relation to herself and her earlier works. The question in the reviews often becomes whether *Oryx and Crake* is as good (or bad) as Atwood's other dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale*. For example, Mary Ann Horne in the broadsheet paper the *Orlando Sentinel* writes that "Atwood, a masterful novelist who highlights social change above special effects, creates a world some 60-70 years from now. [...] The result is a world much like that in her classic *The Handmaid's Tale*" (9 May 2003). The rest of the review explains the plot of *Oryx and Crake*, and in fact no more value judgments of the work are made. As Michel Foucault argues, the author's name functions as a system of classification (234), and here this clearly means that Atwood's works are classified and judged in relation to each other rather than to other works. Similarly, Roger Harris in the large New Jersey paper the *Star-Ledger* writes that

This is the second time Atwood has used the device of anti-utopia to critique society. In *The Handmaid's Tale* she showed us a future in which all women are servants to their male superiors. [...] That book was the superior effort, though. [...] Still, Atwood, a Canadian, is one of the great contemporary writers, with an extraordinary vitality and versatility that shines through in *Oryx and Crake*. She has written 18 [sic] novels over more than 30 years, with a range that can quickly take us from an intriguing puzzle such as *The Blind Assassin* to a psychological drama like *Alias*

Grace. Her extraordinary storytelling talents are at work here, even though this book is as much argument as adventure. (4 May 2003, 4)

Again, *Oryx and Crake* is viewed in relation to Atwood and her earlier works. In fact, of the 19 reviews I looked at, 15 discuss *Oryx and Crake* in relation to *The Handmaid's Tale*. As we see, critics always (and inevitably) review *in relation to* something; an intertextual environment or a tradition. When Atwood's first novels were published, this environment was women's books or feminism; her gender to a great extent became the background against which she was judged. Today, however, her environment is herself and her "star text." This could to a large degree explain the lack of gendered criticism in the reviews of *Oryx and Crake*, and it is difficult to say how and to whom or what a female debutant would have been compared today.

This means that it is reasonable to assume that the expectations the critics have of Atwood, and the authority her name signals, make it easier for them to give her positive reviews. In the Utah-based broadsheet the *Deseret News*, Susan Whitney writes that "because it is written by Margaret Atwood, the book is also beautifully crafted. It is funny, too, sometimes, and full of irony" (20 July 2003, E08). Tess Felder in the Florida-based the *Palm Beach Post* even begins her review by discussing how Atwood is always a safe bet:

It's also nice to have a few authors you can rely on, who consistently give you intelligent, lucid books with ideas you like and characters you love. For me, Margaret Atwood is one of those writers; her latest novel, *Oryx and Crake*, didn't let me down. (20 July 2003, 7J)

Since readers insert their own opinions into a text, Whitney and Felder's preconceptions about Atwood as a great author are clearly relevant for how they read the book. They inevitably compare it to Atwood's other books and to the impression they have of Atwood. Also, when Thomas M. Disch in the *Washington Post* argues that *Oryx and Crake* is at least equal to if not better than George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, we can assume that he is affected by his knowledge of Atwood's authority:

Oryx and Crake can hold its own against any of the 20th century's most potent dystopias – *Brave New World*, *1984*, *The Space Merchants* – with regard to both dramatic impact and fertility of invention. [...] The peculiar excellence of *Oryx and Crake* lies in how she fills out those large spans of time between our Now and the dystopian future that are usually left conveniently blank. We never get to know how England's rule passed from Churchill to Big Brother or how Huxley's Americans decided to be bred in test tubes. (27 Apr. 2003)

I do of course not mean that *Oryx and Crake* is an uninteresting book, but for a book to be proclaimed a classic right away it often needs a famous name behind it. A similar praise for an unknown writer would have been more sensational. This does not mean that reviewers are dishonest, but as already argued they are affected by their preconceptions of the author.

Although Atwood in the reviews is most often seen in connection to herself rather than to “women’s writing,” the image the reviewers have of Atwood is still affected by her gender. This will most obviously be seen in the next chapter, but can also be spotted in the reviews of *Oryx and Crake*. Ron Charles in the *Christian Science Monitor* writes that

The end of the world would be bad, of course, but books about it are a disaster. [...] Now Booker Prize-winner Margaret Atwood is thundering away in *Oryx and Crake*. [...] The quirky science-fiction elements spliced into Atwood’s *Blind Assassin* [sic] have run amok in the genetic dystopia of *Oryx and Crake*. [...] There’s plenty of clever eco-feminist insight here. [...] But as a novel, *Oryx and Crake* is like one of those genetically enhanced tomatoes in the grocery store: impressive-looking but not very satisfying. (8 May 2003)

In this review, Ron Charles calls the novel’s subject matter “eco-feminist.” As I have explained, *Oryx and Crake* is not a particularly feminist book, and the critic is clearly influenced by his image of Atwood as a feminist. Had this novel been written by a man, it is hard to believe that it would have been described as “eco-feminist.” Furthermore, the adjective “clever” often has a condescending and ironic ring to it, and Charles does not seem to take these “eco-feminist” concerns seriously. Like Charles, many of the critics who dislike Atwood’s novel use irony or sarcasm. Broadly, the *Oryx and Crake* reviews can be put in two categories: Those who greatly admire Atwood and love the book, and those who clearly dislike it and who take on an ironic or sarcastic tone. Similarly, Oliver Morton in *Entertainment Weekly*, often considered one of the more serious entertainment magazines, writes that “her amiable narrator, Snowman, knows What Happened – he was there – but in order that the covers of the book not be too close together, he takes his time telling us” (9 May 2003, 79). While it is difficult to know whether this sarcasm has something to do with Atwood’s gender, it is clear that some of the reviewers fail to take her work seriously. This certainly seems related to the subject matter of the novel, which is very topical in the twenty-first century. Just like critics sometimes satirized Atwood’s feminism during the 1970s, they now become ironic toward her environmentalism. This might also be a reaction to the fact that

Oryx and Crake has a distinct message, something which often is thought of as unliterary, a point I will return to.

In the previous chapter I showed how feminists often were characterized as angry, for instance “baring their teeth” (Bell). In two reviews of *Oryx and Crake*, the word “angry” is again used. David Kipen in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the second largest paper on the West Coast, writes that “to paraphrase Michael Ventura, we’ve had 35 years of Margaret Atwood novels and the world’s getting worse. She’s been writing angry, funny, ferociously humane books since 1969” (27 Apr. 2003, M1). It is interesting to see, however, that here “angry” is placed in a positive context, together with “funny” and “ferociously humane.” Similarly, Marta Salij in the *Detroit Free Press* believes that “Atwood, when angry, is prime stuff nonetheless” (11 May 2003, 4E). “Angry,” then, is in these reviews no longer a derogatory word used against feminists. Still, it could be reflected on that Atwood has often been praised for her ironic, witty, and detached works, and in some ways there is an opposition between this praise and the word “angry.” How can a detached and ironic work be angry? What makes her works “angry” seems to be the fact that her literature is concerned with topical issues like gender roles or environmentalism. “*The Handmaid’s Tale* was a rant against the marginalization of women by technology. *Oryx and Crake* is a similar fury unleashed on the marginalization of humans by technology” (4E), Marta Salij continues. Although it is hard to tell whether the way these books are characterized (as “rants” and “furious”) is connected to Atwood’s gender, it is clear that historically, women with distinct opinions have sometimes been characterized as hysterics, because they do not conform to traditional gender roles. While these reviews of course do not characterize Atwood as a hysteric, the word “rant” implies an unnatural rage, and in American society there is still a tendency to see outspoken women as angry, while men more often are characterized as engaged. We saw a similar characterization in the previous chapter, when Atwood was described as “the mistress of controlled hysteria” (Maddocks, “Out of the Woods”), and I will return to this in Chapter Four. In the reviews of *Oryx and Crake* the impression the critics have of Atwood from interviews might have influenced them as well, as she has always been outspoken. The tendency to see works by women as more consciously political (or angry) than works by men is something which I will discuss in more detail below.

While Atwood’s fame clearly is vital for the reviews, this cannot solely explain why the reviews are so different from the reviews of the 1970s. They are also colored by the time in which they were written. Since the 1970s, literary criticism has to a great extent been affected by culturalist approaches like feminism and postcolonialism. The American “culture

wars” of the 1980s complicated and questioned earlier commonplaces of criticism. In the reviews of *Oryx and Crake* Atwood is described as “one of the great contemporary writers” (Roger Harris, *Star Ledger* 4 May 2003, 4) and “one of the best writers in English today” (Victoria Brownworth, *Houston Chronicle* 15 June 2003, 19). As we see, Atwood is no longer called a “woman writer” like she was during the 1970s. This can also partly be seen in relation to her fame, but at the same time the stark critique such designations have received from feminists has probably made critics more aware of the problems of such labeling. Also, the women’s movement of the 1970s of course made gender issues especially pressing at that time, and it might therefore have seemed more natural for a critic to emphasize the author’s gender during the 1970s than it is now.

Finally, the subject matter of *Oryx and Crake* does not “invite” gendered readings to the same extent that Atwood’s first books might have done. As we will see in the next chapter, the author’s gender can still be relevant when critics discuss a work, although it is not that apparent in the reviews of *Oryx and Crake*.

“Literature with a capital ‘L’”

While there are differences from the 1970s in how the critics view Atwood, there are still similarities between the critical tendencies. This especially concerns what is seen as great literature. In the previous chapter we saw that Atwood’s novels were sometimes criticized for being “trendy.” As I noted, the critics might have been negative to feminism, but they could also be reacting to the fact that Atwood’s books are seen to have a “message,” and that this is thought of as unliterary. Similarly, several of the critics of *Oryx and Crake* comment on how the novel is concerned with the contemporary issue of genetic engineering, and in many of the reviews this seems to separate the novel from great literature. Often this is seen in connection with the particular sub-genre of the novel (science fiction), which is viewed as moralistic and didactic. Sven Birkerts in the *New York Times* writes that

I am going to stick my neck out and just say it: science fiction will never be Literature with a capital “L,” and this is because it inevitably proceeds from premise rather than character. It sacrifices moral and psychological nuance in favor of more conceptual matters, and elevates scenario over sensibility. (18 May 2003)

Birkerts's view of "Literature with a capital L" seems at least in part indebted to a modernist view of literature, in that he seems to value complexity and "moral and psychological nuance" rather than "conceptual matters." Birkerts elaborates on his view in noting that

The characters' background stories feel somewhat arbitrarily assigned, and their actions are conditioned at every turn by the logic of the premise. Which brings me back to my problem with science fiction. But this time around I would also like to suggest that a novel like *Oryx and Crake* can address the present-day world in a way that creates a powerful para-literary experience. What tones we lose through the lack of true complexity of character are to some degree compensated for by the peculiar triangulation that obtains among reader, novel and world. [...] The force of Atwood's imagining grows in direct proportion to our rising anxiety level. And so does the importance of her implicit caution. (18 May 2003)

The contemporary aspect of this novel – the concept of genetic engineering – is here not seen as part of literature but rather as "para-literary," and the obvious connections to contemporary life are seen as interesting only as politics, not as literature. It is striking that although, or perhaps because, the work is powerful as social commentary, Birkerts does not seem to view it as great art. In this way, Birkerts's view of literature could be seen as related to a view that great literature is timeless, somehow not connected to present society, but rather embodying universal truths. This is reminiscent of what Toril Moi calls the "ideology of modernism" and the "autonomy of the aesthetic" (*Henrik Ibsen* 19). Moi builds on the work of Frederic Jameson, and explains that the ideology of modernism produces formalist approaches to literature, as for example seen in the American New Critics (*Henrik Ibsen* 20). Furthermore, Jameson elaborates that in the ideology of modernism, "the concept of culture is the true enemy of art as such and that if one opens the door to 'culture,' everything currently reviled under the term of cultural studies pours in and leaves pure art and pure literature irredeemably tainted" (Moi *Henrik Ibsen* 20-21). The "ideology of modernism" and the "autonomy of the aesthetic" mean, then, that great literature – "Literature with a capital L" – is independent of the culture in which it was created; it is timeless and embodies universal truths. This is again connected to *depersonalization* (Moi *Henrik Ibsen* 21), which means that the life of the author and the society she lives in are seen as inconsequential to the text. As Moi argues, "it is easy to see that the doctrines of personalization and of the autonomization of language are in the service of the greater project: to reinforce the idea that art is autonomous with respect to everything else, particularly culture" (*Henrik Ibsen* 21). In the previous chapter we saw that Atwood's works were praised for being objective and impersonal, and this can also be seen as part of this depersonalization.

This view of literature has had vital consequences for much literature by women, and to explain this I would again like to return to Jane Tompkins and to the sentimental novel. As I touched upon in the previous chapter, in the 1970s works like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had previously been viewed as trivial and not part of the literary canon. Tompkins and others argued instead that sentimental literature did important cultural work in trying to reform society. This perspective on these works has been crucial to their status and has led to a renewed interest in works by women and established them as part of the canon. At the same time there has to some extent developed a dichotomy equating women's writing with politics, and men's writing with timeless art. While women's writing has been seen as important for its reformative purposes, it has at the same time not been viewed as universal or timeless. Similarly, as we saw in the previous chapter, works on women and women's lives are often seen as feminist (i.e. political and time-specific) rather than universal. During the 1970s we saw that the fact that Atwood's books were about women and gender roles immediately made them feminist and thereby political. The same often goes for literature by African Americans, Asians, working-class writers and other "minorities," whose writings are seen as political partly because of the author's background and situatedness. I will however not argue that women's literature or postcolonial literature should be discussed as "timeless" or "universal," since I believe *all* literature is situated in its own time. The author writes from a certain perspective at a certain time, and the romantic view of the author as somehow outside of society is clearly misguided. This means that we need to dissolve the opposition art/politics, because all art is situated in its own time and thereby to some extent political. And as we have seen in my thesis, a work is also dependent on the situatedness of the reader and her prejudices, and this clearly also means that a work has a particular historicity. To avoid seeing works as timeless and embodying universal truths should have consequences for seeing women as "the other," since the white male experience can no longer be viewed as universal.

Although it is not clear that Birkerts believes in "the autonomy of the aesthetic," his view of "conceptual matters" as "para-literary" could at least indicate an indebtedness to such a view of literature. In a similar way, David Kipen in the *San Francisco Chronicle* finds *Oryx and Crake* intriguing, and spends much time discussing the plot, noting that it "feels remarkably contemporary" (27 Apr. 2003, M1). In the end, though, Kipen surprisingly concludes that "on novelistic grounds, *Oryx and Crake* can't be counted an outright success" (M1). This is because "the twin-tracked narrative yanks a reader back and forth too often between Snowman's quest and his past, never allowing him enough of a straightway to gather much momentum. Uncharacteristically, too, Atwood leaves her principal female character

underdeveloped” (M1). Kipen’s criticism here relates to Atwood’s earlier works and the impression he has of Atwood, in that she “uncharacteristically [...] leaves her principal female character underdeveloped.” Still, the fact that although the novel is interesting, it is not a novelistic success, might indicate that Kipen does not think the storyline is that important in the work of art, but only as social commentary. Likewise, in Ron Charles’s review in the *Christian Science Monitor*, which I discussed earlier and which is called “Margaret Atwood follows today’s trends into a terrifying oblivion,” Charles concludes that “Atwood has a knack for satiric extensions of developments already underway. [...] But as a novel, *Oryx and Crake* is like one of those genetically enhanced tomatoes in the grocery store: impressive-looking but not very satisfying” (8 May 2003). The phrase “but as a novel” tells us that the previous statement did not really concern the novel, but rather its “message,” which is not seen as a part of literature, as integral to the work.

Here it can be useful to return to the Brontës. As I discussed in Chapter One, during the nineteenth century, literature was thought to have a great influence on society, and an important question was therefore whether the books embodied a good moral. The Brontës, and especially *Wuthering Heights*, were repeatedly criticized for their immorality and the bad influence their literature would have on young girls as well as on the rest of society. Today, however, a book with an obvious moral is often frowned upon, and of the Brontës’ works, *Wuthering Heights* is today seen as the greatest work of art. This might partly be because it best conforms to the standards of modernism which I have discussed. The (im)morality of the novel is today inconsequential. My point is that the standards of judgment are time specific, and works are read differently during different periods. While modernism, as Toril Moi argues, freed female writers from the need to appear moral and like true women (*Henrik Ibsen* 103), it at the same time privileged literature which is seen as embodying universal truths. This has often meant the truths of the cultural elite, and can pose problems for women and minorities.

The standards of writing, then, do not seem to have changed much since the 1970s. In the previous chapter we saw how Atwood often was praised for writing in a “masculine” manner, fulfilling the modernist standards of detachment and complexity of characters. In the reviews of *Oryx and Crake* Atwood is either criticized for not fulfilling these standards, or conversely, those who like the novel often think the standards are fulfilled. Juliet Wittman in the Denver-based tabloid the *Rocky Mountain News* praises Atwood’s novel because it is “narrated with an almost scientific dispassion and a caustic, distanced humor. The prose is fast and clean.” Also, “Atwood has a lot of ironic fun with her subject” (23 May 2003).

Again, the male sides of the dichotomies – complexity instead of simplicity, objectivity instead of subjectivity – are the most valued standards of writing. This also goes for the trope of irony, which creates distance between the author and the characters or the plot. This kind of meta-reflection is seen as important for a work to become a classic, and again, the exact opposite would be the sentimental or melodramatic literature historically associated with women.

“What we look for from Atwood is intricate characterization”

That great art is thought to be disconnected from society also has implications for certain genres. Like Sven Birkerts, the critics who dislike *Oryx and Crake* tend to blame the genre of science fiction. In *TIME Magazine* Richard Lacayo concludes that

Literary fiction is all about nuance. Science fiction is an open invitation to moralizing. In a genre that lets you create your own world, who can resist the temptation merely to blow it all up while shaking a head at what fools these mortals be? Not Atwood. (19 May 2003)

Again, “literary fiction is all about nuance,” and science fiction is criticized because it has a clear message. That science fiction is seen as unliterary is evident not only in the negative reviews. Most of the critics are in fact positive about Atwood’s novel, but none of these critics call *Oryx and Crake* science fiction. Rather, those who like the book often specifically point out that it is not science fiction but for instance a dystopia. “*Oryx and Crake* isn’t sci-fi. [...] Like Orwell and Huxley before her, Atwood takes the world as we know it and suggests scenarios both frightening and all too-probable” (15 June 2003, 19), writes Victoria Brownworth in Texas’s largest newspaper, the *Houston Chronicle*. In both this and in many other reviews it seems important for the critics to emphasize that the novel is not science fiction, in order to validate their positive judgments. Lorrie Moore in the highly respected magazine the *New Yorker* thinks that “Atwood has always been interested in pilfering popular forms – comic books, gothic tales, detective novels, science fiction – in order to make them do her more literary bidding” (19 May 2003). While I agree that Atwood has used these forms in her writing, the expression “her more literary bidding” implies that the genres Moore mentions are not literary, but can be used in literature by a sophisticated writer. This disregard of certain genres and consequent policing of the borders of literature have great implications for what you might term cultural minorities. By this I mean that what has been perceived as

typical fiction for instance for women or workers has more often been termed genre fiction or low fiction. An example is the genre of romance, which together with its readership has been dismissed or ignored. The readers of romance literature have been thought to be young girls or housewives who do not understand or properly react to how the books reinforce the patriarchal ideals in society. Studies in the history and sociology of reading have shown, however, that it is much more complicated than this. Both the readership and the reasons why people read the books are diverse. In her study *Reading the Romance* (1984), Janice Radway shows how these books can be read for many different reasons (like simple relaxation, time to oneself or learning about faraway places and times), and that the readers are very conscious about which types of romance literature they enjoy. Furthermore, the readers do not necessarily accept patriarchal ideas, but can instead see the female protagonist as a strong woman who combines independence and marriage. The act of reading can in itself be a revolt against patriarchy, in that it signals a private space for women where no demands can be made of them; a time which they control. Such studies of genre fiction have made these genres more respectable in recent times, but as we see in the reviews there is still scepticism toward them. The scepticism is probably due to many reasons, amongst others the materiality and paratexts of the physical books, and I cannot go into all the reasons here. But it is worth considering that one of the differences between genre fiction and what is perceived as high literature is that in genre fiction the reader obviously becomes implicated in the work, as most clearly seen in science fiction fanzines. This is incompatible with the view of the author as the sole genius behind a text. Furthermore, genre fiction's moralistic aspects and the character types are in opposition to the literary standards which emerged with modernism, especially the importance of complexity of character. And as we saw in Perry Nodelham's reviews in the previous chapter, "fun" is not an important critical category, and works should be difficult to understand rather than straightforward. This is evident in the reviews of *Oryx and Crake* as well. Sven Birkerts, whose review I discussed above, finds *Oryx and Crake* "very readable" (18 May 2003), while Roger Harris in the *Star-Ledger* thinks that "with all deference to Atwood, it does sound like something out of a mad scientist movie. Much of *Oryx and Crake* is good, scary fun" (4 May 2003, 4). The fact that the book is enjoyable seems in some ways not to be thought of as a criterion for great literature, as Harris has to state it "with all deference to Atwood."

In this respect some of the reviews of *Oryx and Crake* seem too narrow in their view of literature. "What we look for from Atwood is intricate characterization," writes Richard Lacayo in *Time Magazine*. "What's missing here is the emotional sinew of *Cat's Eye*, the

complex mortifications of *Alias Grace*” (19 May 2003). The repeated critique in the reviews of flatness of characters in *Oryx and Crake* is in my view misguided. *Oryx and Crake* can instead be read as a novel where the main concern is not Jimmy himself but rather the catastrophe which has resulted from genetic engineering. This means that the flatness of some of the characters might be part of the novel’s design. These characters grow up in a society dominated by market forces (where chickens are made to grow twenty breasts in order to produce more meat for human beings) and numbers instead of words. In their childhood, Jimmy and Crake play violent computer games, watch porn, and take drugs. Art is disappearing, and with it the complexity of society and humans themselves. In this society, the richness of language is seen as unnecessary, and facts and numbers are replacing emotional words. “Pair-bonding at this stage is not encouraged” (251), Crake answers when Jimmy asks him if he has a girlfriend. “Falling in love, although it resulted in altered body chemistry and was therefore real, was a hormonally induced delusional state, according to him” (235). In the end, Crake creates what he sees as perfect humans, beautiful, immune to all known diseases, and completely docile and uncomplicated. “I think we’ve managed to do away with jokes” (368), Crake explains. This also goes for other aspects he thinks can lead to complications, like desire, religion, and art. “*Watch out for art, Crake used to say. As soon as they start doing art, we’re in trouble.* Symbolic thinking of any kind would signal downfall, in Crake’s view” (430, original emphasis). Crake is not completely evil, in fact he does what he thinks is best for society by trying to get rid of the aspects he sees as causing problems. But society has made him lose sight of the beauty of art, humor, and love, in an all too rational world.

Similarly, the character Oryx may also seem flat, but this is partly because she is only seen through Jimmy and Crake’s eyes. Although Jimmy loves her, she is more of a fantasy in his eyes than a real person. Oryx has been the victim of abuse, and is first spotted by Jimmy and Crake on a child porn web site. She might seem uncomplicated, but throughout her life she has been treated like a commodity and has been sold to different people for different purposes, and this may explain why she appears to be so detached and unemotional. The stories she tells are all the more horrifying when one realizes how unfeeling her experiences have made her.

As for Jimmy himself, I think it is debatable whether he is as flat as some of the critics think, but it is nonetheless apparent that he is also influenced by the horrible society in which he grows up. Although he is a “word person” who appreciates art, the cynicism of society makes him indifferent, and he turns to drugs and alcohol. Just as for Crake, the world more

and more turns into a game for him. He makes up words to use in the marketing of health products, “they sounded scientific and had a convincing effect” (301). In the end, when Jimmy is the only human left (or so it seems), he starts forgetting words and expressions. “There are a lot of blank spaces in his stub of a brain, where memory used to be” (7). Without language, he is turning more and more into an animal and even “wishes he could cool himself by hanging out his tongue” (46). Jimmy might seem uncomplicated in some respects, but this is what a world without art will do, the novel implies. When Gail Caldwell in the high-quality paper the *Boston Globe* criticises *Oryx and Crake* because “the emotionality it seeks to mourn as a bygone thing is too often missing from its own characters” (11 May 2003, H6) it therefore seems almost a paradox; how could the characters be more emotional when this is how society has become? The point of my very brief reading of the characters of *Oryx and Crake* is to show that the exaggerated focus some of the critics have on complexity of character would almost a priori mean that *Oryx and Crake* is a failure. To write about a future exclusively ruled by market forces and large corporations would necessarily need to include people who behave and think differently than we do today. This cannot automatically mean that the novel is unsuccessful. To expand the view of “high literature” to include for instance more genres would clearly mean both a richer literature and greater diversity in what is seen as good literature. This has been an important point for feminists, and can be seen for instance when it comes to the gothic, as I will return to below.

“There is no single, simple, static ‘women’s point of view’”

Here it can be fruitful to consider why Margaret Atwood would choose to write what can be perceived as science fiction, a genre which she thinks has acquired a “dubious if not downright sluttish reputation” (“The Queen of Quinkdom” 245). Not only is science fiction so called genre fiction, it is also seen as a particularly male genre. As I have mentioned, Atwood has always experimented with genres. “I’m interested in the Gothic novel because it’s very much a woman’s form,” she explained in an interview in 1978 (Ingersoll 64).¹² The gothic was earlier seen as a low genre, before feminists took interest in the genre during the 1970s and made it respectable. Here, writers like Atwood are important in that they give such genres

¹² Several Atwood quotations in this thesis are taken from Ingersoll, Earl, ed. *Waltzing Again: New and Selected Conversations with Margaret Atwood*. New Jersey: Ontario Review Press, 2006. For the sake of simplicity I will indicate in the text when the interviews took place and simply refer to Ingersoll in all the references, even though some of the interviews may have been conducted by others. Please consult the book for further details about each specific interview.

more credibility. The same can be seen in science fiction. Concerning her now classic *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood explained that “the majority of dystopias [...] have been written by men, and the point of view has been male. [...] I wanted to try a dystopia from the female point of view” (“George Orwell” 291). Atwood, then, is very conscious of how certain genres are low or male-dominated, and with *The Handmaid's Tale* she tried to reclaim the genre of science fiction / dystopia. This has clearly been successful, since in the reviews of *Oryx and Crake*, *The Handmaid's Tale* is often mentioned as a classic dystopia together with *1984* and *Brave New World*. In this way, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* also help canonize each other, since, as I have argued, they are discussed in relation to each other and become part of as well as create a tradition of dystopias. Furthermore, Mary Eagleton explains that feminists have often questioned realist forms of writing, because they believe that

to query the truth, coherence, and resolution of realism is to undermine the symbolic order. Non-realist forms permit the woman writer to express the contradictions, fantasies or desires that the demands of realism silence. It is in this context that we can [...] appreciate the renewed concern with utopian writing, with science fiction, and with what Ellen Moers terms the “female Gothic.” (253)

If realist literature often has meant describing patriarchy or the male point of view, the use of other genres could become subversive as a way to question this reality. Also, Margaret Atwood's experimenting with genres has helped question the rigid genre hierarchy which is evident in many of the reviews of *Oryx and Crake*. “People aren't interested in pop culture books out of pure random selection. They connect with something real in people's lives,” Atwood argued in 1978 (Ingersoll 64). Atwood's interest in low genres has both been vital for the genres themselves, as well as for Atwood's authorship and fame. Her experimentation has been part of her appeal. In this way she clearly also dismisses a point which seems implicit in many of the reviews, namely that genres are static rather than dynamic.

The fact that *Oryx and Crake* has a male protagonist becomes especially interesting when it is seen in relation to an interview with Atwood from 1986. There she argued that “there's a certain amount of opinion around that says, for instance, that women can't or shouldn't write from a male point of view. [...] There is no single, simple, static ‘women's point of view’” (Ingersoll 142-143). Atwood's point is that women are often expected to write from a female point of view in order for a story to be believable. This can be connected to the stereotype confinement, which I discussed in connection with the Brontës. In the Brontë reviews we saw that the authors were seen to “invariably fail in benevolent characters”

(“Shirley,” *American Whig Review* 232) since they could not understand the feelings of men. Conversely, it was “true that the noblest and best representations of female character have been produced by men” (“Novels,” *North American Review* 356). In the 1970s reviews as well, we saw that Atwood was equated with her characters and that some of the critics simply took it for granted that she was writing about herself. Atwood challenges this view and, even more, she challenges the assumption that there is one female point of view from which all women write. In the reviews from the 1970s we also saw that Atwood’s novels were thought to be “women’s books.” This kind of essentialist view of women is, as I have argued, misguided. With *Oryx and Crake* Atwood seems to be saying that Jimmy’s story is a fiction in the same way that Joan’s story in *Lady Oracle* is a fiction, and again she breaks with the readers’ expectations. And since several of the reviewers are very positive to *Oryx and Crake*, it is clear that she succeeds in questioning both the rigid gender and genre expectations of writing. In this respect *Oryx and Crake* can also be seen to question the boundaries which to some extent exist between men’s and women’s fiction. While *The Handmaid’s Tale* helped reclaim the genre of dystopia, it is at the same time viewed as a specifically feminist book. *Oryx and Crake*, on the other hand, is not a “gendered” book, and in this way complicates the boundaries between male and female writing. Atwood implied this in a relatively recent interview with the Ohio newspaper the *Chronicle –Telegram* when she said that “I think if you write about Shirley/Snow Woman [as opposed to Jimmy/Snowman], it becomes a book about the woman question. [...] The other reason was that I got very tired of people always saying to me, ‘Why do you always write about women?’” (Fichtner 11 Apr. 2004). With *Oryx and Crake*, then, Atwood in some ways responds to the gendered criticism we have seen by demonstrating that books written by women do not need to be feminist; “women” is not a uniform category which leads to a specific kind of writing. Similarly, she has argued that although *The Handmaid’s Tale* is written from a female point of view, “this does not make *The Handmaid’s Tale* a ‘feminist dystopia,’ except insofar as giving a woman a voice and an inner life will always be considered ‘feminist’ by those who think women ought not to have these things” (“George Orwell” 291). For Atwood, then, the distinction between men’s and women’s writing is clearly unfortunate, and both with *Oryx and Crake* and her statements she implies that her books are not to be seen as gender-specific literature.

Another Atwood quotation which is interesting in this context is her statement from 1986 that art has to be moral, and that the whole debate in American literary circles of form versus morality is “so unnecessary” (Ingersoll 104). When she as a highly respected and famous author writes a novel with a clear message, which at the same time in many of the

reviews is seen as great art, she also helps dissolve this dichotomy. Many of the critics who practically proclaim *Oryx and Crake* a classic often support this by referring to Atwood's irony, wit and so on, but it is still interesting that a novel with such clear contemporary relevance is regarded so highly. Atwood's view of literature as reformatory is also evident in the paratexts of the novel, such as on the book's homepage (Random House, www.oryxandcrake.com), where she lists several non-fictional articles which support the novel's argument. Her non-fictional piece "Writing *Oryx and Crake*" similarly makes an argument for the real dangers of genetic engineering. The article does not concern the novel's form or characters but rather its "message," and Atwood does not try to hide that she wants to get something across to her readers. And like her famous name, her opinions clearly influence the reviews. One of the latest reviews I have included is from the *Houston Chronicle*. The critic Victoria Brownworth has read or heard Atwood's comments on the novel, and quotes some of them in her review. It is inevitable that the critic in some ways is colored by Atwood's comments, and her conclusion is that "*Oryx and Crake* isn't sci-fi. [...] Atwood takes the world as we know it and suggests scenarios both frightening and all-too-probable" (15 June 2003, 19). Similarly, Jackie Pray in the popular tabloid *USA Today* writes that "the story is disturbing because it's not entirely far-fetched. A visit to the book's Web site, www.oryxandcrake.com, reveals a list of news articles that inspired Atwood" (26 May 2003). In 2003 Atwood is a famous writer and critic, and is clearly more able to influence her own reception.

My discussion of Atwood above indicates how crucial her engagement with current issues, in society as well as in literature, is for her authorship, and, as I have explained, this involvement has undoubtedly been important for her success. Atwood's texts have to some extent fulfilled the modernist standards of irony, distance, and self-reflexivity; texts like *Lady Oracle* are also self-reflexive about art and can in this way be seen as modernist. At the same time Atwood debates the standards of modernism in her texts by using low genres and arguing for the interconnectedness of literature and society.

What has changed since the 1970s?

I have already discussed how criticism of Atwood's works has changed substantially since the 1970s, in that the critics are no longer equally preoccupied with Atwood's gender. I will briefly mention a few more aspects which were relevant both for the reviews of the nineteenth century and during the 1970s. Firstly, in the previous chapter I showed how the comparisons

with male authors were the positive ones, while the female mainly were negative. In the reviews of *Oryx and Crake* this point is hardly relevant any longer, since *Oryx and Crake* is almost exclusively compared to Atwood's earlier books. There are also a few comparisons with the historically two most famous dystopian novels, *1984* and *Brave New World*. These are, not surprisingly, positive comparisons. A few others are found in Michiko Kakutani's review in the *New York Times*. Kakutani does not like *Oryx and Crake* and calls it a "lame piece of sci-fi humbug." She still thinks that "the book is not as dreary as Doris Lessing's recent post-apocalyptic novel *Mara and Dann* or Tatyana Tolstaya's futuristic satire *The Slynx*" (13 May 2003). Kakutani does not compare these books any further, and she only seems to be mentioning them in order to say that they are boring. This does not necessarily have something to do with the authors' gender, and I cannot generalize from this one instance. Another review where several comparisons are made can be found in the *New Yorker*, where the critic uses a broad selection of comparisons, both male and female. In addition to Atwood's own novels, Lorrie Moore compares *Oryx and Crake* to a wide range of texts:

One can feel the influences of Denis Johnson's *Fiskadoro* or Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. In the novel's whimsical fantasies of biological evolution and technology, one can discern the dark left hand of Ursula K. Le Guin, and in its shrugging, eschatological amusement it channels the spirit of Kurt Vonnegut. [...] We have a theme reminiscent of Margaret Wise Brown's *The Runaway Bunny*. (19 May 2003)

This review is however much more thorough than the other reviews, and more than anything else reflects the differences between this magazine and the more mainstream newspapers.

Language-wise, the impact of the women's movement can be spotted in that during the 1970s, several of the reviewers referred to "Miss Atwood," while in the contemporary reviews Atwood is addressed as "Margaret Atwood" or once "Ms. Atwood." The designation Ms. was promoted by feminists during the 1970s because it was seen as a neutral designation which did not reveal anything about the woman's marital status. "Miss" on the other hand signals that the woman is unmarried, and thereby focuses on the woman's "availability." With "Ms." the language used about women approximates the neutral language used about men (Mr.). As we see in the reviews, this language change has been successful, in that Miss is avoided in the most recent reviews.

Another instance of language change is found in the *Washington Post* (27 Apr. 2003), where the critic Thomas M. Disch writes "his or her" instead of just "his" which has been the traditional third-person possessive pronoun. This change is a move away from the traditional

male-as-norm language, where “he” and “his” have been used when discussing people in general. This language change is not inconsequential, because as *Oryx and Crake* has told us, language itself is important for how reality is perceived.

A final example of gendered criticism which was obvious in the previous chapter was the tendency to equate the author with her characters. Considering that the characters in *Oryx and Crake* are primarily male, this is clearly impossible, and so this discussion will be far more relevant in the next chapter.

Men’s (un)gendered criticism?

As in the previous chapter, I would like to consider the gender of the critics, to see if there is a difference in how women and men appreciate Atwood’s novels. Of the nineteen reviews under consideration, eleven are written by women. This is an increase from the 1970s, and could indicate that there are more female critics today than earlier. This will become even clearer in the next chapter, where a very large percentage of the reviews are written by women. Atwood, who is also a book critic on the *New York Times*, argues that during the 1970s,

most of the books reviewed were by men, and so were most of the reviews. There was, even then, a tendency for women to review books by women. (This accelerated in the next few years, as misogyny-dodging review editors became terrified of having women’s books reviewed by men; the upshot was that nobody was offering me any books by men. I finally had to ask. I prefer the amphibious to the monocultural, and no one should welcome ghettos.) (“Not Just a Pretty Face” 6)

It may seem, then, that female critics often still are assigned books by female writers, and so this might also partially explain why there are more reviews written by women in recent times. Although some of the newspapers I have discussed have their own critics most of them choose someone external, and this, in relation to Atwood, often seems to be a woman. This development can both be seen as a progress, in that there are more female reviewers now than before, but at the same time it can, as Atwood touches upon, create a separate “ghetto” for women, implying that their books are “women’s books” rather than just books.

Another aspect which is worth considering is that of the eleven female critics, nine are very positive about the book (while one has mixed feelings and one hates it). The female critics are also the ones who most often emphasize their personal feelings about Atwood’s writing or who emphasize Atwood’s status, calling her for instance “one of the best writers in

English today” (Brownworth, *Houston Chronicle* 15 June 2003, 19) and “nearing Nobel Prize status” (Seaman, *Atlanta Journal Constitution* 4 May 2003, C5), while *The Handmaid’s Tale* is described as a “classic” (Horne, *Orlando Sentinel* 9 May 2003). If we look at the reviews written by men, four dislike the book, one is mixed in his judgment while only three are positive.

Although this may be too slim a selection from which to generalize, it could also indicate that the female critics have a closer relationship to Atwood than do the male critics. This could be related to my discussion of how Atwood has been an icon for feminists. By discussing Atwood as a great writer, the critics help confirm her status as a classic author. I am not saying that the female critics secretly do not like the book but are only interested in politics and feminism, but that they may have a closer relationship to Atwood’s writing than the men. This does not mean that Atwood’s books are “women’s books,” but that her reputation as a feminist icon may have led to an increased popularity among women. Still, the overall impression is that all critics respect Atwood as a writer and those who dislike *Oryx and Crake* are more often disappointed in the novel’s genre or topical content than in Atwood per se. Also, some of the critics might have been chosen by the newspapers precisely because they have a close relationship to Atwood, as we for instance will see in the next chapter, when writer and Atwood scholar Joyce Carol Oates reviews *Moral Disorder*.

I will now move on to another of Atwood’s most recent books, *Moral Disorder* (2006). This book differs substantially from *Oryx and Crake* in both form and content, and the reviews will therefore give further insights into today’s criticism and the recent reception of Margaret Atwood.

Chapter 4. *Moral Disorder*

Moral Disorder (2006) is a short story collection, and all the stories in the book concern the life of Nell and her family, friends, and surroundings. The stories shift from first-person narration to third-person narration, and although the first-person narrator is not always named, one can assume that this is Nell. The stories jump back and forth in time, spanning from Nell's childhood as an 11-year-old until she becomes an old woman who needs to "reach out to make sure Tig is still there, still breathing" (5). Atwood thinks her collection is "more like a photo album" ("Disorderly Conduct" 1).

Many critics read *Moral Disorder* autobiographically. It is therefore important to consider whether the book in fact is autobiographical, and Margaret Atwood has shed some light on this herself. She has throughout her career emphasised that she writes fiction, not autobiography, and in an interview she has stated that *Moral Disorder* is "not meant to be read as autobiography" ("Disorderly Conduct" 1). She also notes that Nell is not a writer, like herself. There are however certain episodes in the book which are related to her life, "there has to be some blood in the cookie to make the Gingerbread Person come alive," as Atwood stated in another interview (Boddy 17 Sept. 2006). Atwood even seems to invite autobiographical readings sometimes, as when she calls one of the stories "The boys at the Lab." In the acknowledgment in *Oryx and Crake* she thanks "the boys at the Lab" (446), and in her non-fictional piece "Writing *Oryx and Crake*" she notes that "I grew up among the scientists – 'the boys at the lab' mentioned in the Acknowledgements are the graduate students and post-docs who worked with my father in the late 1930s and early 1940s at his forest-insect research station in northern Quebec, where I spent my early childhood" (284-285). In the paratexts of the novel, Atwood's American publisher has also tried to give the impression that there are autobiographical elements in *Moral Disorder*. On the cover of the American version of the book and on the publisher's website, it is claimed that "*Moral Disorder* is fiction, not autobiography; it prefers emotional truths to chronological facts. Nevertheless, not since *Cat's Eye* has Margaret Atwood come so close to giving us a glimpse into her own life" (Anchor Books Publisher). This might be a sales gimmick, as celebrity gossip is known to sell in the United States, but as I hope to show, Atwood might have had other reasons to write about a subject matter which she must have predicted would be read autobiographically.

I will begin this chapter by briefly discussing the reviews in relation to the critics' literary standards, before I move on to consider how the autobiographical aspects of the book influence the reviews. I will also discuss how Margaret Atwood can be seen to revise the genre of autobiography with *Moral Disorder*. Since *Moral Disorder*, like Atwood's three first novels, concerns the life of a woman, I will also consider whether she is still seen to be writing "women's books." Finally, I will discuss whether reading the book autobiographically has to be a negative thing. Feminists have sometimes read books autobiographically in order to situate female authors as subjects, and therefore autobiographical readings may not simply be gendered in a negative sense.

"A kindly, wise old granny"

The common denominator of the reviews of *Moral Disorder* is that they are all extremely favorable toward the book. As I have discussed, Atwood has often been praised because of her ability to "write like a man," without sentimentality, fulfilling the modernist standards of distance, irony, and complexity of character. We see this in the reviews of *Moral Disorder* as well. Elizabeth Taylor's comment in the *Chicago Tribune* is typical: "Margaret Atwood [...] ingeniously enriches her fiction with fiercely intelligent cultural analysis, psychological insight and wit" (26 Nov. 2006, 2). The words "intelligence" and "wit" appear again and again in discussions of Atwood's writing. These words imply distance; Atwood's humor is of the intellectual kind, often combined with sarcasm or irony, the exact opposite of emotional sentimentality. The male sides of the dichotomies – intellect, logic – are still the ones which most readily receive status and praise. Similarly, in the high-quality paper the *Baltimore Sun*, Victoria Brownworth praises Atwood's "economy of language and brevity of emotion" (8 Oct. 2006, 4F), while in the *Boston Globe* Jules Wittes Schlack admires Atwood's "fearlessness and wit" (20 Sept. 2006). Here I want to mention a statement Atwood herself made about this in 1990: "I suspect that sort of definition is something people fall back on because they can't take women's concerns or life patterns seriously; so they see wit in those books, and that's all they see" (Ingersoll 121). This might have been more true during the 1970s, when for instance *Lady Oracle* sometimes was seen as a witty book without much substance. Today, however, it is clear that Atwood's books are taken very seriously, and her wit is more likely praised because it creates distance.

In Chapter Two I pointed out how in *Time Magazine*'s review of *The Edible Woman*, "feminine" writing was seen as negative, while the "masculine" aspects were positive:

On its deceptive surface, *The Edible Woman* can be mistaken for an airy little comedy [...] But reader, beware. Behind this quiet, well-taught Garden Party-girl behavior, Atwood conceals the kick of a perfume bottle converted into a Molotov cocktail. (Maddocks, "That Consuming Hunger" 26 Oct. 1970)

Karen Brady's review of *Moral Disorder* in the New York state-based the *Buffalo News* shows how this preference can still be at work today:

Margaret Atwood, clever as ever, seems to lose some of her edge and erudition in *Moral Disorder* [...]. But pierce the tender crust of these tales of domesticity, and Atwood's wily, witty and challenging ways are all here. (24 Dec. 2006, G5)

In both these reviews there are feminine elements (Garden Party-girl behavior, tender crust) which conceal the real, good and implicitly more masculine writing. A similar devaluation can perhaps be spotted in the Ohio broadsheet the *Columbus Dispatch*, where Margaret Quamme writes that "*Moral Disorder*, at first looks to be both one of her most personal and most conventional" (15 Oct. 2006, 07D). "Conventional" could here refer to the fact that nothing extraordinary happens in the book, but at the same time it seems to imply conventional for women, as the book deals with a woman's life and domestic issues (which surely would not be conventional issues for a male author). When Quamme writes that the stories take "strange turns" and concludes that "*Moral Disorder* looks like a slight book, but it puts out tentacles of its own" (07D) it seems that conventional women's writing here means unimaginative, everyday and dull literature.

This devaluation of "feminine" writing is of course not always present in the reviews from 2006. In fact, many of the reviews of *Moral Disorder* seem to move from seeing it as a great to an outstanding book *because of* its personal elements, its tenderness. This is often seen in connection with the book as autobiography:

Autobiographical in feel, they may be circumscribed by lived rather than imagined experience. [...] Atwood's characters stumble along [...] while their creator views them as if through the wrong end of a telescope: they look so tiny from here, she seems to say, so foolish. Why would we do anything other than forgive them? It's the tender evasiveness of this famously harsh writer, despite her cool, wry tone, that makes these tales feel autobiographical. (Alice Truax, *New York Times* 15 Oct. 2006)

One way of understanding Alice Truax is that since *Moral Disorder* is somewhat autobiographical, Atwood feels so close to the subject matter of the book that she cannot

distance herself from the characters like she usually does. The closeness makes this book less harsh than Atwood's earlier books, and this does not necessarily have anything to do with Atwood's gender. Another possible implication of Truax's review, however, is that she believes that beneath the tough surface, Atwood is a "real woman," tender and compassionate. The book is not seen as autobiographical because of the events as much as because of its more tender/feminine tone. As we see from this review and as we saw in the previous chapter, Atwood has a reputation for being harsh and angry. This reputation is clearly linked to Atwood's gender, and seems to stem from a combination of what is seen as her political writing (about feminism, ecology etc) and her "masculine" style. In her study "Country, Politics, and Gender in Canadian Studies" from 1988, Judith McCombs looked at Atwood reception in the Canada and the United States, and concluded that "the most frequently recurring issue her critics cite is a lack of warmth" (Friedman and Hengen 8). Atwood's style has in this way both made her admired as a writer, and at the same time she has received the reputation of "Snow Queen," as she herself has remarked ("Not Just a Pretty Face" 6). We see this in the review in Connecticut's largest paper the *Hartford Courant*, where Kit Reed writes that "Margaret Atwood [...] must have a witch in her family tree – and I mean that in a good way" (8 Oct. 2006, G8). The image of Atwood which has often surfaced in the popular press is of a woman who does not conform to the expected gender roles – i.e. a "snow queen" or a "witch." While this may sometimes be thought of as positive, it is still troublesome, since it indicates a stereotypical view of women. This was evident in the previous chapters as well, when Atwood was seen as angry and a "mistress of controlled hysteria" (Maddocks, "Out of the Woods" 19 Mar. 1973).

In the review from the *New York Times* one could therefore wonder whether the reviewer meant that Atwood's tenderness – traditionally seen as a female characteristic – was thought to reveal her true self. The same indication is there in the *Boston Globe*, where Julie Wittes Schlak writes that in "these apparently autobiographical stories" Atwood "displays the same intellectual fearlessness and wit of her other books, but this time tempered with a compassion and richness of portraiture that will surprise even her most avid fans" (20 Sept. 2006). Schlak loves the book and even thinks the stories "help us become the people we should be" (ibid). In these reviews Atwood still writes according to the standards of good literature, but she also adds compassion and tenderness, and these traditionally feminine characteristics are seen to be autobiographical. Some of this criticism seems directed toward Atwood rather than the book; the author is more compassionate (feminine) here, and this is a good thing. Throughout my thesis I have argued that so called masculine writing often has

been valued higher than “feminine” writing, and therefore the criticism we see now may seem like progress in this respect. But the question here is whether it is the writing that is valued or rather what it is thought to reveal about Atwood, namely that she really is a tender woman.

This turn of events must be seen in connection with Atwood’s fame. Atwood herself made a telling comment about this in her article “Not just a Pretty Face” (1994), where she humorously wrote that “I’ve grinned more lately, in a self-conscious effort to overcome this Snow Queen Image [...]. All I can do by now is pray for the advent of a few more distinguished and character-signaling wrinkles, and then I will be a kindly, wise old granny” (6). In the reviews of *Moral Disorder*, Atwood has in fact practically become a “kindly, wise old granny.” Cheryl Reed in the *Chicago Sun-Times* writes that “the work is certainly fuelled by a mature writer who has the advantage of looking back over the course of her 60-plus years, her decades-long marriage, and fashioning a deeply personal account that reads more like a memoir” (10 Dec. 2006, B9). As in the previous chapter, we see that the image the critics have of Atwood is crucial for how they read the book. In 1994, Atwood argued that critics

now avoid overt references to the appearance of the writer, but don’t think it isn’t taken into account. *Who you are*, in relation to your book – what age and color, and of course what gender – is just as important, if not more important, than it ever was, although some of the plus and minus points attached to your various attributes may have altered. (“Not Just a Pretty Face” 6)

In Cheryl Reed’s review above, who Atwood is – her age and gender – clearly matters for the critic, although this time in a positive sense. In fact, Atwood’s age is repeatedly used to explain the success of her book. In the *Washington Post* the English novelist A. S. Byatt believes that

a young writer, like a young woman, has a narrow strip of experience from which to contemplate an unknown future, empty and waiting for its form. An older writer, reminded of mortality by aging knees and dying parents, has the consolation of seeking everything in rich detail, meaningful and apparently pointless together. (15 Oct. 2006, T3)

Of course, Atwood’s age and who she is do matter in relation to how she writes, and it is not unnatural that the critics mention this. But it is striking that in the reviews of *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood’s age was seldom used to explain her success, and so her age is clearly brought up now because *Moral Disorder* is thought to reflect herself. In this way some of the reviews to

some extent seem to reduce Atwood's fiction to simple autobiography; she can write well about the life she has been through. Similarly, Michael Upchurch in the *Seattle Times*, Washington state's most widely circulated paper, praises Atwood's book because "There's mystery here, and humor, and a tough brand of knowledge that can only come with age (Atwood is in her 60s)" (22 Sept. 2006). The image of Atwood as a "wise old granny" is central to all these reviews, her good writing is explained by her age and her ability to write about her life.

Earlier I argued that autobiographical readings – equating the character with the author – are closely connected to the stereotype of *confinement*, which means that women are confined to their own experiences and unable to write about what they have not experienced themselves. This in turn robs the author of authority. In the case of *Moral Disorder*, however, the autobiographical readings emphasise Atwood's authority. Again we see how the author's name, fame, and background become central to how the book is read. For Atwood, the image of the "Snow Queen" affects how the book is reviewed, as her surprising tenderness is appreciated. In the foundational feminist text *Thinking About Women*, Mary Ellmann argues that "while sentiment is a disadvantage, the alternative of feminine coolness is found still more disagreeable" (42). This might be a bit of an exaggeration, since, as we have seen, Atwood's writing has been praised for its detachment and irony, but as is apparent in these reviews and the "Snow Queen" versus "kindly, wise old granny" images, the expected gender roles of women and men can still be important for people's expectations of women's and men's writing. The discussions of autobiography in the reviews above show that Atwood's "male" writing is thought to be more of a construct than the more compassionate aspects of the text. This may imply an essentialist view of gender, where all women deep down are emotional and tender.

"Life with a capital L"

In the reviews from the 1970s we saw that Atwood's novels sometimes were seen as literature for women. *Moral Disorder*, however, is often implicitly seen as "universal" or "timeless" in many of the reviews, as it is thought to deal with life, death, mortality, or love. Coleen Grissom in the Texas-based paper the *San Antonio Express-News* writes about the "11 poignant, reflective, realistic stories, often with hilarious, ironic observations; it captures [...] 'Life with a capital L'" (22 Oct. 2006, 11J). Again Atwood's irony is praised, but it is also important to note that Atwood is seen as capturing "Life with a capital L," even though her

work is about the life of a woman. In the review of *Lady Oracle* in the *Los Angeles Times* I noted that Atwood's novel was compared to Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*. While Roth's novel was interesting to both men and women, Atwood's book about a woman was seen as uninteresting to men. *Moral Disorder* also to a large extent concerns the life of one woman, but now this does not mean that the book is for women only. "Margaret Atwood doesn't deliver sermons," Grissom continues, "but in her precise, elegant prose, she surely does reveal fundamental truths" (11J). Similarly, Victoria Brownworth in the *Baltimore Sun* thinks Atwood is a "consummate and articulate wordsmith of the human condition" (8 Oct. 2006, 4F). Unlike *Lady Oracle*, *Moral Disorder* is thought to be about the human condition rather than women's lives. I would like to return to this aspect of the reviews later.

It is interesting to reflect on why Atwood chose to write in such a manner that her book would be read autobiographically (by for instance naming the last chapter "The Boys at the Lab"). In the *New York Times*, the critic Alice Truax speculates about whether Atwood has written autobiographically in order to leave behind a memory of herself:

Inevitable extinction is the private apocalypse we all face. Perhaps that's why in this collection, dedicated to her family, Atwood too has left a trail of breadcrumbs in the forest – "for anyone who might be trying to find her." (15 Oct. 2006)

Truax seems to be caught up in the image of Atwood as an old legend, however, and the picture of an almost dying Atwood is reinforced when Truax writes that Atwood "may be keeping one eye on the horizon and warning us, 'Not yet,' but her art, rising up behind her, catches the light and declares, 'still'" (ibid). This comment in fact resonates with a passage in *Moral Disorder*: "These are the tenses that define us now: past tense, *back then*; future tense, *not yet*. We live in the small window between them, the space we've only recently come to think of as *still*" (4). Instead of thinking that Atwood (after all only 66 years old) is leaving breadcrumbs in the forest, there is also the possibility that Atwood again is exploring and subverting literary genres. Atwood has called the now classic *Surfacing* a gothic story, and as we have seen she has for instance used science fiction in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*. Autobiography has been an important genre for feminists because it gives women a voice, and it puts their experiences centre stage. In *Moral Disorder*, Atwood writes about traditionally domestic and "feminine" activities and shows how they are complex and not at all trivial. For example, in the story "The Art of Cooking and Serving" Nell as an 11-year-old sews in order to cope with the pregnancy of her mother. Nell's favorite book is a book on cooking and serving, because it is orderly and structured, not like her present confusing life.

Moral Disorder is what Joyce Carol Oates in her review calls “domestic realism” (*New York Review of Books* 2 Nov. 2006), and throughout the book domestic issues are filled with importance and complexity. Also, several relationships between women are discussed, such as those between Nell and her sister, Nell and her mother, and Nell and her teacher. In an interview in 1990, Atwood stated that “writers haven’t dealt with girls age eight to twelve because this area of life was not regarded as serious ‘literary’ material” (Ingersoll 119). In the same interview she points out “the tendency to think that the only relationships of importance to women are their dealings with men (parents, boyfriends, husbands, God) or babies” (Ingersoll 119). As we see in these reviews, however, *Moral Disorder* makes the story of a woman’s life into “universal” fiction, and moves stories about women away from stories about “the other,” to becoming stories about “fundamental truths” and “Life with a capital L.”

Furthermore, what we often think of as traditional autobiography has, in the line from Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* via Rousseau, been viewed as a male genre. Sherrill Grace explains that

An autobiography is self-conscious, deliberate and authoritative. The Subject (I) is central, self-centred, and its own Object (he). Perhaps most important, this “I” is individualistic, asserting its separateness from others, its distinct boundaries and unique qualities. [...] This autobiographical “I” enforces (writes, creates) an image of unified identity; it denies *differance*, fragmentation, gaps, otherness. Discourse (symbolic language and narrative structure) becomes a defence against the unconscious, which, if allowed semiotic expression, would most certainly disrupt the conscious ordering of things and expose the teleological Self as an illusion, a game, a fraud. The very seamlessness of the deliberate reconstruction through/in time of the traditional autobiography functions to buttress a largely white, Western, middle-class, male concept of identity and to conform and re-present a sense of power and authority. (190-191)

The point here is that autobiographies have often presented an authoritative (male) subject, and have not acknowledged difference as well as the centrality of relations between people. The self is seen as unified, denying the influence of the unconscious. Still, this seems primarily to go for the autobiographies which are most central to the western canon. “The traditional construction of the ideal autobiographer as a unified, transcendent subject, representative of the age, has favoured privileged white male writers who can fit into this role more easily than the marginalised and the dispossessed” (2), argues Maggie Humm. But although these texts might have dominated the canon, we also need to consider that autobiography has taken many forms, and has been an important genre for instance for working-class people. Similarly, some women’s autobiographies have tried to subvert the

image of the authoritative self by presenting life stories as fractured, and to a greater extent stressing the importance of relationships. According to Grace, Atwood follows in this tradition because she in *Lady Oracle*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Cat's Eye* subverts the traditional view of autobiography and the Subject. Although Atwood is not writing her autobiography in any of these books or in *Moral Disorder*, she is writing about the life of a woman and is thereby relating to this genre. Atwood "questions the very nature and possibility of autobiography" (199), Grace writes. This can be said about *Moral Disorder* as well. I will explain this by briefly discussing two aspects of the book: Its form and point of view, and the blurring of life and fictional stories.

The form of *Moral Disorder* is in itself a statement on traditional autobiography. The 11 short stories show glimpses of Nell's life, a life filled with moments and short stories rather than composed of a unified, logical whole. There is no single moment which everything leads up to. Rather, the book starts with old age, and jumps back and forth in time. The shift in point of view is also significant. Nell is not the authoritative "I" with one life story, her stories can rather be seen from many perspectives, all of them as true or untrue as the rest. Life stories resemble fiction and "In the end, we'll all become stories" (213), Nell thinks. In the last story of the book, "The Boys at the Lab," this becomes explicit. When Nell's mother has forgotten about the boys at the lab, Nell realizes that "the fate of the boys is now up to me" (254) and she makes up the story of what happened to them. "I give the parts of the barbarians to Cam and Ray because I want them to have more of a story – more of a story than I know, and more than they probably had" (256). Someone's life story does not simply end with death; rather there are memories and stories that pass on. The fictional and yet very lively and seemingly truthful account which then follows of the boys at the lab makes us reflect on the process of telling someone's life and hence on the genres of auto/biography. Biography and autobiography are the stories we make up about our lives, both true and untrue at the same time. When Nell's father has a stroke and memory loss, Nell thinks that "I wish I could think of something to amuse him. [...] Stories are no good, not even short ones, because by the time you get to the second page he's forgotten the beginning. Where are we without our plots?" (229). The authoritative autobiography with a unified "I" is clearly a fiction as well. With *Moral Disorder*, then, Atwood seems to be commenting on the genre of autobiography rather than simply writing her own autobiography. As we have seen, the fractured life story of a woman is seen as universal fiction in the reviews, something which indicates an important revision of the genre of autobiography, where "women's writing has often been dismissed as merely personal, private, restricted to the categories of diary, journal

and letter, and therefore irrelevant and lacking importance” (Grace 190). Similarly, Linda Anderson argues that

there remains [...] a *political* imperative for women to constitute themselves as subjects if they are to escape being never-endingly determined as objects. This need not mean returning to the same (masculine) subjectivity which saw itself as unitary and complete, simply expanding it to include women within its definition, but rather imagining multiple subjectivities, which are without foundation but located, instead, in particular times and places. (90)

This connects exactly to my discussion above, in that *Moral Disorder* constitutes a woman as subject, but at the same time makes this subjectivity fractured. Also, the importance that is placed on Nell’s environment – the Canadian nature as well as the specific time periods she goes through – clearly situates her, and acknowledges the influence of a person’s environment on her life.

Autobiography as a genre has, however, been discussed not only as a way to make women’s stories more significant, but also in connection with the danger of speaking for others. When many of the reviews declare Atwood’s fiction to be universal, it is therefore not entirely unproblematic. In the New York-based newspaper *Newsday*, Laura Collins-Hughes writes that

If readers are lucky, that’s when they discover Atwood and her bone-deep understanding of what it is to be young and female: when they are barely across the threshold of adulthood. It helps, in unfamiliar terrain, to have a guide. Now, 66, Atwood long ago expanded her repertoire to include the other decades of life through which she has passed. (17 Sept. 2006, C27)

Again, the critic believes that Atwood writes about her own experiences, in that she has “long ago expanded her repertoire to include the other decades of life through which she has passed.” Furthermore, the reviewer thinks Atwood has a “bone-deep understanding of what it is to be young and female”; implying young, white, and middle-class female. A poor African American would not necessarily think that Atwood’s books are “guides.” Bob Hoover in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, which is the dominant paper in the Pittsburgh area, similarly sees *Moral Disorder* as “an accurate road map” (19 Nov. 2006, E5). This is again connected to a perception of Atwood’s book as universal fiction, and it is important to note that also male critics believe Nell’s stories can be a road map for all people. While these reviews do not marginalise Atwood’s writing as women’s writing, they still argue for universal truths and

“Life with a capital L,” and for the implications that result from that. Although the fact that women’s lives are seen as universal clearly signals progress from the reviews of the 1970s, this still means seeing the subject as a representative for all people, and this means a generalisation which is exactly what feminists have tried to avoid, for instance in emphasising the importance of a subject’s environment, as we saw in the quotation from Anderson. The fact that Margaret Atwood is a white heterosexual woman clearly becomes important in this respect, because what exactly is “Life with a capital L”? The large generalisations implicit in such phrases only seem to expand the tendency of speaking for others to include women as well.¹³

But does my argument above fall into what Toril Moi calls a sexist trap – namely to “refuse to admit that a woman can represent the universal (the human) just as much or just as well as a man” (*Henrik Ibsen* 243-244)? According to Moi, such arguments can be “prisoners of a picture of sex or gender in which the woman, the female, the feminine is always the particular, never the norm” (*Henrik Ibsen* 244). But I believe there is a difference between the sexist trap Moi is discussing and my argument above. As Moi also explains, “there is a world of difference between the tacit universalization of one’s own case, and the explicit attempt to use oneself as a potentially significant case study” (*Simone de Beauvoir* 147). I agree with Moi that it is vital to see books about female characters not as “women’s books” or as automatically concerned with “women’s issues” or feminism, and I also agree that “if the expression of the personal is to be interesting to others, it must necessarily be general as well” (Moi *Simone de Beauvoir* 146). This does not mean, however, that we should see an individual as representative for all people. In the *Baltimore Sun*, Victoria Brownworth writes that “in *Moral Disorder*, Atwood does much more than reveal the subtext of her own life, or the life of Everywoman” (8 Oct. 2006, 4F). To see Atwood as “Everywoman” is in my view clearly problematic, because it implies that Nell’s case (which is thought to be Atwood’s) is universal, it is the story of all women. This ignores the specificity of amongst others race, class, and historical circumstances. I do not mean, however, that *Moral Disorder* cannot speak to us across gender or race, or express something of value about humans. But the point is that we must constantly keep in mind the specificity of the individual in question, rather than asserting that this is how all people (or alternatively, and perhaps even more problematically, all women) experience life.

¹³ Atwood in a related manner argued in 1994 that “women have not succeeded in removing the gender markers from themselves, but they have managed to stick a few of the same kinds of markers onto men. Think □dead white European male’ uttered in a tone of contempt, and you’ll see what I mean” (“Not Just a Pretty Face” 6). But as Atwood’s tone implies, is this really the best strategy?

What is also worth considering here is that all of these publications primarily target white middle-class readers. When they discuss *Moral Disorder* as the story of Everywoman, they probably have these readers in mind. Still, this can in my opinion only to a certain degree explain, and not excuse, the tendency to speak for others or to see these readers as representative of all people.

“The reader could easily divine that the narrator is Atwood herself”

Why has criticism changed so much, in that Atwood’s book is no longer called a “woman’s book”? As in the previous chapter, it is clear that Atwood’s fame and authority are crucial in this respect. In the reviews of *Moral Disorder*, Atwood’s name obviously influences the critics. When it comes to comparisons, she is again almost exclusively discussed in relation to herself and her earlier books. In fact, this is even more apparent here than in the previous chapter. In the 22 reviews under consideration, only once is Atwood compared to someone other than herself. The one instance is found in Bob Hoover’s review in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (19 Nov. 2006, E5), where *Moral Disorder* is reviewed together with Alice Munro’s autobiography *The View from Castle Rock* (2006). In all the other reviews, *Moral Disorder* is only compared to Atwood’s other books or discussed in relation to Atwood herself.

And as in the previous chapter, the critics are influenced by the image they have of Atwood, amongst others as a feminist. In the *Buffalo News*, critic *Karen Brady* argues that “placing an aging Nell in the first story is a brilliant stroke [...]. It also establishes the female as the stronger of the sexes, a theme familiar to Atwood readers” (24 Dec. 2006, G5). For me, it is difficult to see why the female is seen as the stronger of the sexes in this story. While Nell’s husband Tig wants to rid himself of bad news by telling them to Nell immediately, Nell on the other hand does not want to hear such things too early in the morning. Brady reads this as a feminist statement, and she later in the review quotes one of the few passages in *Moral Disorder* which explicitly discusses stereotypes of women. What she draws out of the novel and how she interprets it are clearly influenced by her view of Atwood as a feminist. Here it is important to note that unlike during the 1970s, Atwood’s feminism is now not seen as something negative. “Her early novel *Surfacing* was a ground-breaking feminist text,” Victoria Brownworth in the *Baltimore Sun* writes (8 Oct. 2006, 4F). During the 1970s we saw that “feminist” was used as a derogatory word, while now it may be more neutral. After 35 years of feminism, this is not surprising. And again we must remember that Atwood is highly

respected, and it is therefore difficult to say how a debutant writing feminist books would have been received today.

The fact that *Moral Disorder* is thought to be autobiographical also clearly influences how critics read the book. In the *Boston Globe*, Julie Wittes Schlack writes that “all of these apparently autobiographical stories are told from the perspective of an author and editor named Nell” (20 Sept. 2006). As I mentioned, Atwood has pointed out that one of the reasons why the stories are not strictly autobiographical is that Nell is not a writer like Atwood is. In the *Boston Globe*, however, the image of Atwood becomes so pervasive that Nell herself becomes an author. The same thing happens in the *Baltimore Sun*: “Nell is a writer, like Atwood herself. [...] The reader could easily divine that the narrator is Atwood herself” (Brownworth 8 Oct. 2006, 4F). *Moral Disorder* is in fact misread in several of the reviews. In the *San Antonio-Express News*, English professor Coleen Grissom calls the main character Nan (22 Oct. 2006, 11J), perhaps confusing her with Atwood’s publisher Nan Talese. These reviews indicate how the readers’ preconceptions of the author and her surroundings influence their readings of the works.

Overall, then, the critics no longer see Atwood as a “woman writer.” As in the previous chapter, the changes from the reviews of the 1970s cannot solely be accounted for with reference to Atwood’s fame, and again societal factors must be taken into account. As I have argued, designations like “women’s books” received stark criticism during the American culture wars, and critics became more conscious of the difficulties of these labels. Furthermore, since feminism was a more topical issue during the 1970s than it is today, Atwood’s novels at that time were, as noted, often seen as trendy. Today, literature about a woman’s life is not automatically connected to feminism, like it was during the women’s movement. Likewise, if we compare the reviews of *Oryx and Crake* and *Moral Disorder*, we see that *Moral Disorder* is considered the better book, since *Oryx and Crake* is sometimes criticised because it is too concerned with conceptual matters. *Moral Disorder* is on the other hand not seen as having a specific “message.” The view of literature as embodying universal truths is prevalent in the reviews, and great Literature seems to be unrelated to society, it is timeless, and it deals with life, death, or love. During the 1970s, then, Atwood’s novels about women were seen as dealing with conceptual matters to a greater extent than they are today.

The death of the author?

The reviews of *Moral Disorder* have shown how important the author's name and persona are for the reviews. I have discussed how the perceived autobiographical aspects of *Moral Disorder* make the critics even more positive to the book, perhaps because the personal tone is thought to reveal Atwood's true self. The question then becomes whether all such autobiographical readings are problematic. Should a critic focus on the author when she reads a text? As I have touched upon, feminists have, somewhat simplified, often taken two opposing views on this issue. Some have wanted with Barthes to declare the death of the author, as the author has been seen as an authoritative and hence patriarchal figure. The text does not belong to the author, they argue. Conversely, in revisionist works on female authors the lives of the authors have obviously been crucial, and feminists like Nicole Ward Jouve argue that "you must have a self before you can afford to deconstruct it" (Jouve 7). The importance of establishing female agency is vital for the feminist battle. What should be clear from my thesis is that the author is situated in her own time, and that in order to fully grasp a work we cannot treat the work as an ahistorical entity. Therefore, the author clearly is important for the work. This does not mean however that the author's name should be used in order to pass value judgments on the works (although this is probably inevitable in terms of reception) but that the author's background and situatedness may help us understand the work better. Neither does this mean that the author is the final signifier of her work, but that interpretation becomes a mixture of the reader's own preconceptions, the knowledge we have of the author and her society, as well as formal considerations of the text. These aspects cannot be separated, but are an integral part of all interpretation. This view of the text and the author can have positive effects for female writers, as we for instance see in Jane Tompkins's readings of sentimental literature, where she argues that we cannot fully appreciate the texts without the historical awareness of the time of the author. To see the author as important for her work also means that we see literature as connected to society, and that societal factors have implications for both how the author writes the work and how we as readers read it.

The problem with some of the reviews of *Moral Disorder*, then, is not that they discuss Margaret Atwood per se, but that they discuss her in terms of stereotypical images. There is a certain essentialism connected to such views in that Atwood appears as a typical woman, rather than acknowledging the diversity in such a category. We have seen that the personal might have been thought of as positive because it reveals Atwood's true self as a tender old woman. In some of the reviews the point of the autobiographical readings seems

merely to be gendered speculation – to establish certain stereotypes in relation to Atwood. Similarly, when Karen Brady in the *Buffalo News* writes that “It is also, perhaps, Atwood looking, from a certain age, at her own mortality, her own choices in life... ‘What if I missed a turn somewhere – missed my own future?’ her protagonist, Nell, asks” (24 Dec. 2006, G5), the autobiographical speculation seems not to serve any specific purpose other than as guesswork about Atwood’s motives. The autobiographical readings of *Moral Disorder* in the reviews are more complex than what we saw during the 1970s, when some of the reviewers simply took it for granted that Atwood was writing about herself, and for instance discussed the protagonist of *Surfacing* as “this lady, this person, our author” (Wimsatt 483). The tendency to equate the characters with the author has been criticized and problematized by feminists as well as by Atwood herself, and this might have made critics more aware of the problems with such readings. Nevertheless, some of the autobiographical readings of *Moral Disorder* can, as argued, be seen as somewhat problematic.

Although not in an obviously negative sense, it is clear that gender can still be a factor in the reception of Atwood’s books. Atwood is seen as at her absolute best in *Moral Disorder*, and the fact that this is largely a domestic book about a woman her own age implies that confinement can still be a relevant stereotype – women write best about women’s issues. But an important development is of course that these issues are no longer seen as irrelevant or trivial.

Are book reviews changing?

In the previous chapter we saw that there was an increase from the 1970s in the number of reviews written by women. This is even more obvious in this chapter. Of the 21 reviews under consideration, 17 were written by women, while only four were written by men. Again, it seems that female reviewers more often are assigned books by female writers (and probably vice versa). It is perhaps especially striking that, as opposed to *Oryx and Crake*, *Moral Disorder* concerns a woman’s life, and we see that of the two, *Moral Disorder* is more often assigned to female reviewers. Although this would need further research, this fact could also indicate that such books are thought to be about women’s issues and therefore best understood by women. This time there is no difference in how well the critics like the book, however, since all the reviewers are extremely positive.

I will end this chapter by briefly discussing two other notable aspects of the reviews of *Moral Disorder*. These aspects are self-reflexivity, and the length and form of the reviews. In

Chapter Two I argued that since literary standards are time-specific rather than objective and constant, critics should try to be self-reflexive about their own standards of judgment. This self-reflexivity is apparent in a few of the reviews of *Moral Disorder*. Coleen Grissom in the *San Antonio Express-News* repeatedly uses expressions like “from my perspective” and “in my view,” and she writes that “I suspect there’s a rule somewhere, written or unwritten, dictating that reviewers must be objective – and in this review I knowingly violate that rule” (22 Oct. 2006, 11J). But even though Grissom here reflects on her view of Atwood as “one of the most intelligent, challenging, insightful, wise and funny writers of our generation” (11J), at the same time her statement implies that she accepts that a reviewer should (and so can) be objective, it is just that she won’t be it this time. “I can’t help myself: I’ve met this great Canadian writer” (11J), Grissom writes. The self-reflexivity here does not concern the critical standards used in the review (she praises realism, irony, complexity) but rather her feelings for Atwood. The same can be said about Julie Wittes Schlack’s review in the *Boston Globe*. “In the interest of full disclosure, I should stipulate that I’ve never read a Margaret Atwood book that I didn’t at least admire; a few of them I absolutely cherish” (20 Sept. 2006), she begins. These reviewers indicate that they know how important the author’s name is for how they read the book. This is a change from the reviews from the 1970s, where no such reflection was shown. The American culture wars of the 1980s and the postmodern turn in literary criticism have clearly made critics more aware of the complexity of criticism and literary standards, and of the difficulty of speaking for a larger we.

A final point to consider is the length and form of some of the reviews. Especially noticeable is Geoffrey Bateman’s review in the *Rocky Mountain News* (21 Sept. 2006), which is divided into five parts: “Plot in a Nutshell,” “Sample of Prose,” “Pros,” “Cons,” and “Final Word.” Finally, there is also a grade given to the book (in this case the grade is A). In other publications, such as *Entertainment Weekly* and *USA Today*, the reviews are very short. These three publications are, not surprisingly, the most tabloid I have considered. Coleen Grissom in the *San Antonio-Express News* seems to reflect on how book reviews are not as popular any more, beginning her review by writing “in case you’re busy and can’t add reading this review to your multitasking, here’s the crux,” and in her third sentence writing “for those still reading [etc]” (11J). Whether reviews in general in fact have become shorter, less important in the overall coverage of culture, and written more hastily is not something I can explore in depth, but some less than thorough reviews at least mean that the critics’ prejudices become more explicit, and they also mean that the most popular authors will receive most of the reviews.

An obvious exception is the review in the *New York Review of Books*, which in fact is an eight pages long article about Atwood, written by author and Atwood scholar Joyce Carol Oates. This is as much a tribute to Atwood as a review, and is more thorough than the other reviews in every respect. “*Moral Disorder* is likely to be read, perhaps misread, as Margaret Atwood’s most explicitly autobiographical fiction, though Nell is not a writer, or even a creative artist” (2 Nov. 2006), Oates writes, separating her review from the other reviews I have discussed. It should be noted, however, that the *New York Review of Books* has a different generic texture than the other publications I have considered, and such long reviews are not uncommon in this publication.

The reviews of *Moral Disorder* have shown that although Atwood’s book concerns the life of a woman, she is no longer dismissed as a “woman writer.” Rather, she has great authority and is seen as one of the world’s best writers today. Still, the image the critics have of Atwood sometimes seems stereotypically gendered, which shows us that gender can still be a factor when critics review today.

Conclusion

Throughout my thesis I have argued that critics as well as authors are influenced by their own environment and prejudices. During the nineteenth century the belief in essentialist differences between the sexes meant that the Brontë sisters to a great extent were judged in regard to notions of femininity and masculinity. The critics often relied on the dichotomies feminine/masculine, emotional/logical, and intuitive/intellectual. Furthermore, stereotypes such as confinement, formlessness, and materiality affected how critics read and judged the books written by the three sisters. These stereotypes and the female sides of the dichotomies were not necessarily discussed negatively, but this criticism still implied a limitation on women's writing. Furthermore, the dichotomies meant a separation between women's and men's literature, which consequently excluded many female writers from the canon. During the nineteenth century what Toril Moi calls "idealism" dominated literary criticism (*Henrik Ibsen* 103), which meant that literature was thought to have an influence on society and thereby had to convey good moral values. As a consequence, the Brontës were often criticized for their unwomanly and coarse works.

In the 1970s, when the women's movement flowered in the United States, the stereotypes of which the Brontës were victims came under attack. Critics were now simultaneously more aware of the stereotypes and more consciously preoccupied with them. Margaret Atwood received mixed reviews, and her books were both criticized for being concerned with "women's issues" and at the same time praised for their "masculine" style. What was viewed as "feminine" literature did not seem to be that different from what it was during the nineteenth century, but it was now more accepted that women (like Atwood) could write in a more "masculine" manner. Detachment, irony, and complexity were highly valued standards of writing, as opposed to sentimentality and simplicity.

Moving on to the present, Atwood's fame has become so prevalent that she is no longer seen as a "woman writer" but rather as "Margaret Atwood." The name Margaret Atwood now signifies amongst others her feminism, environmentalism, as well as her earlier works. As Foucault argues, an author's name "serves as a means of classification" (234), and Atwood is now judged in relation to herself and her earlier works. Still, the image of Atwood in the reviews is sometimes stereotypically gendered, with the "kindly, wise old granny" replacing the earlier "snow queen" image. Atwood's writing is no longer called "women's writing," but rather "universal," something which points to both Atwood's status and the fact

that such designations came under stark critique both during the women's movement and the American culture wars of the 1980s. What is seen as good writing is similar to what it was during the 1970s, and the ideology of modernism means that irony, distance, complexity, and intellectual wit are valued. Furthermore, great literature is often thought to be disconnected from present society. This means that during the 1970s Atwood's feminism was sometimes thought of as too trendy, while now her environmentalism is frowned upon in some of the reviews.

In all three periods we have seen that the male sides of the dichotomies – intellect instead of emotion, detachment instead of sentimentality – have been the most highly valued. Here I want to emphasize that this cannot be accounted for simply within the framework of gender. Toril Moi argues that melodrama was to a large extent dismissed by modernists because “they take it to demonstrate a humanist belief in expression (as opposed to the approved antihumanist belief in the failure of language)” (*Henrik Ibsen* 28). Instead, distance and irony reflect on language itself, and this kind of meta-reflection has been important for the standards of modernism as well as what has been called postmodernism. Still, sentimental and melodramatic writing have often been connected to women, as we saw in some of the reviews from the nineteenth century as well as from the 1970s. To challenge the hegemony of modernism could therefore have positive effects for both women and literature in general.

What is also worth considering is how the quality of Margaret Atwood's writing is throughout the reviews explained by her intelligence. During the nineteenth century we saw that the Brontës' writing was thought to stem from their female intuition, rather than a conscious intellectual effort. Many of the dichotomies do not seem to relate to masculinity or femininity to the same degree today. Still, the reviews of *Moral Disorder* indicate that an essentialist view of women as tender can still be present today, although in a much less obvious manner than before.

One of the main questions I raised in the introduction was whether the criteria which dominate literary criticism mean that books written by women less often will be perceived as classics. During the 1970s we saw that Atwood's novels were seen as feminist, i.e. trendy, and this sometimes set them apart from great, timeless art. At the same time, the fact that Atwood early on became an icon for feminists has clearly made her more famous and recognized. This shows us that we cannot view literature as unconnected to society, since a writer's popularity and status often are connected precisely to how she engages with topical issues. The problem can be, however, that when critics discuss a female author, she seems more likely to be labeled for instance feminist, while male authors more rarely receive any

such labels. A criticism which would recognize how *all* literature in some ways are concerned with and connected to its time, as well as to the background of the author, would therefore clearly be both more just and more fruitful, and could perhaps create a more diverse canon.

Margaret Atwood's fame and recognition are, as we have seen, the result of many factors, amongst others her engagement with contemporary society, her experiments with different genres, as well as the quality of her writing. It is interesting that Atwood's nationality is almost never mentioned and hardly ever reflected upon in the reviews. This is another indication of how the readers' situatedness becomes important for how they read the books. In the United States, Atwood's gender and age are important to explain her works, but not her nationality. In Canada, on the other hand, Atwood has been instrumental exactly in creating a national Canadian literature. The US criticism shows that Caroline Rosenthal was right when she concluded that "Famous Canadians do not become *international* in the US but *American*" (46). The fact that Atwood's nationality is so seldom mentioned in the reviews indicates that she is seen as an American author rather than as a post-colonial or Canadian author.

The reviews of Atwood's novels also reveal how a particular form of gendered criticism during the 1970s created an image of her as a snow queen, or a woman who could "write like a man." One of Atwood's obvious achievements, however, has been the way in which she has engaged with this criticism, both within her literary works and in interviews, articles and so on. By experimenting with genres which have often been viewed as unliterary or male, she has questioned the standards of literature evident in the reviews, as well as the gender expectations and stereotypes we saw in the earliest criticism. Atwood reacts to both being called a "woman writer" and to being seen as an "honorary male," and has helped destabilize such gendered boundaries. Again, Atwood's authorship shows us how a successful author is not a genius outside of society, but rather an engaged person who reflects on and responds to current developments in both literature and society.

What can the reviews tell us about the state of American criticism today? Although Atwood's fame becomes so central to the reviews that it becomes difficult to generalize, it at least seems that gendered criticism has decreased substantially since the 1970s. Even though the image the critics have of Atwood is affected by her gender, her books are taken seriously and there is little speculation on Atwood's personal life, as one often sees it in the coverage of today's music and movie stars. This might indicate how the culture wars and postmodern theory have had an especially great impact in literary circles, and similar studies in other media would be fruitful in order to give a fuller picture of American society and its gender

expectations. One problem with much of the literary criticism, however, is still that it has very rigid standards of what is seen as great literature.

In my thesis I have not to a great extent discussed the different profiles of the various publications, and the reason for this is that the book reviews are overall very uniform in form and content. Almost all the publications I have chosen are large broadsheet papers, with similar profiles and target groups. Although some of the reviews are shorter now than during the 1970s (not to mention the nineteenth century), the fact that relatively lengthy reviews still are found in most American newspapers indicates that books and book reviews are still important in American society. While the relatively new media of film and the Internet may seem to dominate American society more and more, we still see that Atwood's books are given relatively large amounts of space, and she is clearly seen as a celebrity. The most thorough reviews were not surprisingly found in the *New York Review of Books* and the *New Yorker*, and the in-depth articles about amongst others Atwood in these magazines indicate how such publications are important for an author's reputation in the United States. These two magazines stand out from the other publications with their more reflexive and thorough reviews.

What is the importance of book reviews? Publisher Marlie Wasserman argues that the books do not simply result in reviews, rather, this is a "chain": "Books result in good reviews and bad reviews, which in turn influence books" (16). What gets published and written is influenced by literary critics. Similarly, author and Professor Amy Ling thinks that "many busy people depend solely on the reviews for keeping them abreast of what is going on and never read the books themselves. Book reviewers and editors of book review publications are doing crucial cultural work" (27). The reviews in American newspapers are in this respect central to what is read, and to which authors become famous and part of the canon. Within the field of book history, this is illustrated by Robert Darnton's "communications circuit." Darnton argues that a communications circuit runs from the authors to the publishers, printers, shippers, booksellers, and readers, who are all deeply connected and influence each other (11). He elaborates that

A writer may respond in his writing to criticisms of his previous work or anticipate reactions that his text will elicit. He addresses implicit readers and hears from explicit reviewers. So the circuit runs full cycle. It transmits messages, transforming them en route, as they pass from thought to writing to printed characters and back to thought again. (11)

This means that reviews, including those I have discussed, matter both to what people read as well as to how authors write. This interconnectedness is obvious in relation to Margaret Atwood, who responds to gendered criticism both within and outside of her works.

Overall, then, the most recent reviews reveal surprisingly little gendered criticism, compared to the reviews of the 1970s. A related question is, however, whether books by female and male authors are reviewed with equal frequency in the American press. The web-based journal and radio MobyLives.com briefly examined this in 2002, by looking at the number of articles in the *New Yorker* which were about or written by women in 2002. Their conclusion was that

there have even been issues of The New Yorker this year where the magazine's table of contents featured no women at all, or where the only contribution by a woman was a single poem. There hasn't been much fiction by women, but when there is, it's usually by a big star. And by far, the preponderance of contributions written by women so far this year have come from staffers filing reviews in the back section, as opposed to being featured in a star turn in the features section. (Dennis Loy Johnson)

This research inspired the website www.complete-review.com into conducting a related survey ("How Sexist are We?"). They discovered that only 12,61 % of the 900 books they had reviewed were written by women. As a follow-up they counted the percentage of reviews of books written by women in three random issues of the *New York Review of Books* (26 Sept. 2002 – 24 Oct. 2002) and five issues of the *New York Times Book Review* (1 Sept. 2002 – 29 Sept. 2002). They found that books written by women amounted to 18.42 % and 30 % of the total books reviewed. This might therefore be a greater obstacle for women debutants than gendered content in the reviews themselves, and could be an interesting topic to investigate further.

Perhaps most of all, my thesis has shown how crucial an author's name is for the reception of her works. The author is clearly alive in the reception of literary works. As Atwood argues, "*who you are* [...]" is just as important, if not more important, than it ever was, although some of the plus and minus points attached to your various attributes may have altered" ("Not Just a Pretty Face" 6). While starting out as a "woman writer" during the turbulent 1970s, Atwood's name today signals almost only plusses, as she ranks as one of the great authors in North America, and even the world.

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